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Budgeting and Financial Accountability in School Management

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ABSTRACT

This discourse is directed at highlighting the importance of financial accountability in school management. Budgeting is a managerial function that enables every administrator to efficiently utilise all financial resources available to the organisation. Financial accountability will be difficult to achieve in the absence of good budgeting. The role of the school administrator in effective budgeting, as well as the challenges to effective budgeting in the face of a negatively skewed national budgetary allocations are also highlighted. It concludes that effective budgeting will be difficult to achieve in the existence of financial uncertainties, policy inconsistency in educational development and increasing pressure on education facilities arising from growing demand for formal education in the public school system. It recommends the development of an education policy that will have a minimum life span of twenty years; and the development of a body of school system personnel that is compliant to the digital system of information management. A reliable information base and efficient information management system will go a long way in facilitating good budgeting practice and effective accountability.

Introduction

Budgeting can be defined as the process of planning the use of any available quantum of fund or money over a specified period of time, to achieve specific goals in future. It is always tied to the existence of fund in the execution of projects or routine plans. Budgeting is necessitated by the scarcity of resources in relation to the variety of activities or programmes that must be implemented to achieve organisational goals. It is one of the major functions performed by school administrators generally (Kpakol, 2002; Abraham, 2003; Ebong, 2005; Ololube, 2011). A budget is the outcome of the budgeting process.

The school administrator is expected to keep certain statutory records which include documents that reflect financial transactions. There are also other documents that do not necessarily reflect financial position of the school but which necessarily guide expenditures in the school. Such documents include records on stores and inventory, documents on individual members of staff (including teachers), students' admission, progress and withdrawal register; class attendance register, and personal files on students (Akinwumiju & Agabi, 2013). The federal government of Nigeria, FGN, requires every school administrator to keep these and other vital documents necessary in the effective management of the school system (Federal Government of Nigeria, 2002). This is because good record keeping is pertinent to effective budgeting. By implication, a school administrator is expected to have good knowledge of the flow of fund with regards to the effective running of the various components of the school system. The administrator is also expected to keep accurate and up-to-date record of all financial transactions involving the school. This therefore makes the school administrator accountable to the education funding organs of government and all stakeholders in the school system. He/she is also fully responsible for the efficient management or mismanagement of school fund.

In this era of global economic meltdown and rising national inflation, careful planning and regular monitoring of the use of the increasingly inadequate financial resources in the provision of formal education is very important. It is especially so, if Nigeria is to achieve quality education at all levels in the not-too-distant future (Agabi, 2014). This paper is directed at highlighting issues and challenges faced by school administrators in relation to financial management. The central purpose is to promote efficiency in resource management in educational institutions.

In the presentation of issues in this paper, secondary sources of information consisting of documents and research reports were explored as well as other related literature. Discussion of issues is made in four parts: conceptual framework, budgeting and delegation of functions, importance of budgeting, and challenges to effective budgeting.

Conceptual Framework

The Concept of Accountability

The word accountability is synonymous with responsibility. From a generic perspective, being accountable for something implies being responsible for the control or management of the thing for which one is accountable. A person that is accountable is that person that is responsible for decisions and actions that he/she makes and is expected to explain such decisions and actions when asked (Oxford, 2010). Technically, accountability in school management refers to the ability of a school manager to explain operational decisions, actions and outcome of all activities involving the use of human and material (including financial) resources in the school as often as he/she is called upon to do so by constituted authority. The principle of accountability makes the school administrator responsible for the effective

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management or otherwise of all the resources that are available to the school at any particular point in time.

Black (2003), defines accountability from an economic perspective as a systematic summary in money terms of the activities of an organisation over a period, usually a year, in terms of profit-and-loss, income and expenditure; and taking into cognisance, assets and liabilities of the organisation within the accounting period. Akinwumiju & Agabi (2013:133) also define accountability from the perspective of financial responsibility in school management. For this duo, "it is the duty of the school head to ensure that all monetary receipts and expenditures are properly documented and that all expenditures comply with school budget as much as possible." They emphasised that as much as the school head is responsible for the management of school fund, he/she is accountable to his/her employers and benefactors with regards to grants and aids received by the school and is therefore expected to provide evidence of receipts and expenditure of such grants and aids when the need arises. From the perspective of general responsibility, Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia (n.d.) defines accountability as answerability, blameworthiness, liability and the expectation of account giving. It goes further to describe accountability as:

The knowledge and assumption of responsibility for actions, products, decisions and policies including the administration, governance, and implementation within the role or employment position and encompassing the obligation to report, explain and be answerable for resulting consequences. Wikipedia, The free encyclopaedia. Retrieved 2015-09-22 from www.wikipedia.org

Accountability is based on clearly established standards and codes of conduct that includes sanctions for impropriety especially as it relates to a formal organisation. Blagescu, Casas & Lloyd (2005) approach the concept of accountability from the stakeholder's perspective with the purpose of increasing legitimacy and credibility as well as organisational learning and innovation. They identified stakeholders as individuals or groups that can affect or be affected by the policies and actions of an organisation. For this trio, accountability is about any process by which an organisation commits itself to respond to and balance the needs of the stakeholders in its decision making processes and activities as well as in delivering against this commitment.

Obviously, accountability is not just about financial responsibility in an organisation but also encompasses responsibility for decisions, activities and human relations maintenance (including maintenance of staff personnel, students and parents, in the case of school management); and all benefactors of the organisation. Accountability therefore needs to be transparent to all interest groups for it to achieve credibility. Since the accounts giver is liable to punishment for impropriety, Ogbonnaya, (2010) observes that a person that is accountable should have a clearly defined scope of operation and accountability in terms of what he/she is accountable for and who he/she is accountable to (in terms of reportage); and, that the frequency of educational policy modifications in Nigeria creates ample room for irregularity in accountability in school management. In line with this observation, Okorie & Uche (2005); Agabi & Nsirim (2008); and Adejumobi (2010) recommend that education policies and practices should be stable and reliable to the extent that they constitute tools of quality improvement and accountability for resource input, utilisation and productivity in educational institutions.

Principles of Accountability

The achievement of effectiveness in financial accountability in the management of a school mandates a school administrator to abide by certain basic principles of accountability. As much as Black's (2003) definition of financial accountability is appropriate for the subject of this discourse, Blagescu *et al* (2005) provide an outline of four basic principles which they presented as dimensions of accountability namely, transparency, participation, evaluation and, complaint and response. These principles are also relevant in this discourse and will be discussed in relation to accountability in school management.

The principle of transparency

This principle requires an organisation to be open about its activities and plans with regards to information provision. In the school system for instance, parents and students expect to be informed on major decisions such as decisions on increase in fees, changes in school uniforms, list of books, changes in curricular and extra-curricular activities and on all other decisions that imply increase in the private cost of education. They need to be given cogent reasons for any reduction or additions to the cost of the services that are provided in the school (Agabi, 2014). As observed by Akinwumiju & Agabi (2013), transparent accountability in school management is marked by the willingness of the administrator to show evidence of income and expenditure when called to do so. It also includes the provision of accurate and verifiable information on expected revenue, viable sources of revenue and the volume of existing fund available to the school within the accounting period.

The principle of participation

This involves the adoption of a participatory approach to decision making that enables stakeholders in a school to make input to the decisions that affect them in that particular school. This principle forms the rationale for the existence of General Staff Meetings, Parents-Teachers' Associations, PTA, Board of Governors, etc, all of which constitute the forum for varying degrees of participation in decision making as well as in the dissemination of vital information (Ogbonnaya, 2010). The principle of participation by Okorie & Uche (2005b) is of the observation that a school administrator may not necessarily be an accountant but should be able to manage school fund; and the achievement of effectiveness in fund management requires the administrator to work in collaboration with the bursar and other responsible teachers to facilitate budgeting and budget implementation as well as accountability for fund utilisation in the school.

The principle of evaluation

Evaluation is an essential component of accountability that allows organisations to indicate what they have achieved and what impact they have made while at the same time allowing stakeholders to hold them to account for what they said they would do (Blagescu *et al*, 2005). Evaluation and its outcome can inform parents, teachers, students, and benefactors of school projects and activities. It also provides a pool of information that can guide financial projections in terms of resource requirement in the near future.

The principle of response to complaints

Complaints arise when stakeholders in a school are dissatisfied by the issues that affect them or by the way their wards are treated in the school. Appropriate response to complaints encourages dissatisfied stakeholders to express grievances or to query actions and policies that are detrimental to their interest or to the welfare of their wards in the school.

In terms of general welfare of all groups, Blagescu *et al* (2005) recommend that transparency, participation and evaluation processes be used to minimise the need for complaints and that complaints and their management should be used only as an instrument of last resort in accountability. Invariably, complaints will not arise when school administrators abide by codes of relationship with stakeholders and are seen to maintain clearly stipulated standards in school management.

Budget and Budgeting

Budget is an economic term that lends itself to a variety of uses and interpretations. It is therefore common to hear such expressions as personal income budget, national budget, family budget, school budget and so on, depending on the purpose of budgeting and the scope. It is for this reason that a budget has been defined variously as "the planned financial outlay for optimal achievement of predetermined goals" (Leigha, 2011:127); and the operational instrument for the allocation of resources (Ebong, 2006:178). For Black (2003), it is a statement of government's planned receipts and expenditures for some future period, normally a year, and is usually accompanied by a statement of actual receipts and expenditures for the previous period. Hilton, Maher & Selto, (2000) describe a budget as a detailed plan that is expressed in quantitative terms and which shows how an organisation will acquire and use financial resources within a particular time frame. From the perspective of school management, Agabi (2014) describes a budget as a cost management tool that enables a school manager to make effective use of financial resources that are available to the school within a financial year because it defines the pattern of cash flow and expenditure within the specified period.

Generally, budgeting involves planning financial activities to achieve specific goals. A budget is the outcome of budgeting. A budget is a financial plan that shows the volume of available and expected fund in an organisation within the time frame of the planning process, from the setting of goals to the points of implementation and evaluation. "It is a plan of financial operation embodying an estimate of proposed expenditure for a given period or purpose and the proposed means of financing them" (Ruiz & Koch, 2012:41). A budget shows the allotment of fund to various programmes and activities in any given organisation based on existing knowledge/information on resource requirement and fund availability. Budgeting involves a projection of future resource needs and an outlay of estimated cost for each of the clearly identified resource need. Technically, a budget has three major components as shown in figure 1:

(a) The goal component which defines its purpose and scope;
(b) The funding component which shows existing and expected fund and
(c) The expenditure component which shows the allotment of fund to various budgetary items.

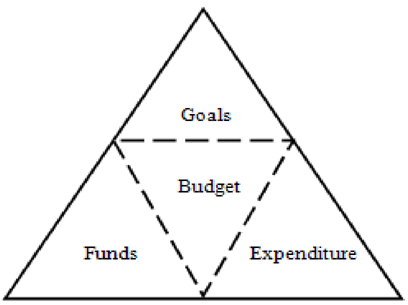

Figure 1. Basic components of a budget

The broken lines in figure 1 indicate that none of the three components can be assessed for effectiveness in isolation from the others. Goal achievement is dependent on pattern of expenditure which in turn depends on fund/resource availability.

Purpose of Budget

The purpose of a budget must be clearly defined and is often captured in the title of the written document. A school budget may be directed at funding administrative activities, specific educational programmes or capital projects. A typical example is captured in Cooper & Nisonoff's (2012) description of budget, as a statement of educational programme for a given unit as well as an estimate of resources necessary to carry out the programme and the revenue needed to carry out those expenditures in a fiscal year, is appropriate from the perspective of educational management. Budgeting for each unit in the educational system ensures that the educational programme for every unit in the organisation is properly accounted for. For this duo, a budget may be vertical or horizontal. It is vertical when it includes the various income and expenditure estimates such as line items, functions and cost centres; it is horizontal when it includes current estimates for the given fiscal year compared to prior audited income and expenditures and a projection of costs into the future. A horizontal budget gives consideration to past, present and future financial bases, realities and expectations. A budget is considered incomplete if it shows an outline of planned expenditure without showing the financial basis for such planned expenditure. Such type of budgeting gives ample room for fund diversion and financial mismanagement. As much as possible, a budget should be flexible enough to allow for regular reviews and necessary adjustments (Nwikina, 1998). It should also be a plan that facilitates the efficient utilisation of resources and the optimal achievement of stated goals.

The general purpose of a budget is captured in the definition of resource management provided by Nnadieze & Onyeche (2011:125) as "the effective and efficient deployment of an organisation's resources where they are needed. It implies the coordination of all the resources (men, materials and money) in an organisation in the right direction for the attainment of organisational objectives." In an educational institution, a good budget should be a departmentalisation of fund and expenditure. For instance, a comprehensive budget on staff salaries should show the various categories of staff in the school, the number of workers in each category, the total number of workers in the non-teaching category and the total number of teachers in the teaching category. Each group should be broken into smaller units, by their salary grade levels, qualifications and/or type of job (such as top priority, high risk, part-time, contract, etc). This makes for proper monitoring of budget implementation process and ensures proper accountability for financial resources with regards to the efficient utilisation of other resources in the school system.

The general purpose of budgeting in school management, as captured in the above definitions, is to:

a. Indicate the goals(s) at which a specified amount of money is directed in the maintenance of a school in a fiscal year;
b. Indicate the general resource base of the school in the fiscal year;
c. Specify areas of expenditure;
d. Show cost proposal for the various areas of financial activity; and

e. Indicate the school's revenue base for the fiscal year.

Other purposes of a budget are presented by Ruiz & Koch (2012), from the Illinois School District Budgeting experience. In their opinion, a budget may be designed to: (a) meet the requirements imposed by education law; (b) provide authority for spending and taxing; (c) satisfy a minimum level of financial information for state, local and federal governments.

Budgeting and Delegation of Functions

In the school system, the school administrator is regarded as the chief accounting officer. This is because school funds are directed at him/her. The school administrator is therefore accountable to the funding ministry or organ of government in the case of public schools, and to the proprietor or board of governors in the case of private schools. The administrator is responsible for the efficient management or mismanagement of school fund. The complex nature of school management compels the school administrator to delegate functions to competent subordinates (Ibara, 2010). However the use of delegated personnel in the management of school financial resources requires close monitoring of financial activities through proper documentation of all financial transactions, regular inspection of financial documents and endorsement of all major financial transactions exceeding a clearly defined fund limit, by the school administrator. Some areas of delegation of financial responsibility in school administration are identified by Agabi (2013) to include:

Banking transactions

This is usually assigned to the school bursar or chief accountant.

Collection of levies/financial pledges

This may be assigned to any member of staff (including teachers) with good reputation in interpersonal relations and honesty. It must be stated here that levies are not allowed at the Basic levels in Nigerian public schools (i.e. primary and junior secondary). This particular function therefore excludes administrators of public basic schools.

Disbursement of fund to recurrent areas of expenditure

This may be delegated to top ranking personnel like the bursar or the administrator's deputy. Such disbursement should also have the administrator's approval. In Nigerian public schools, the disbursement of fund to recurrent and capital budget units is controlled by government, especially at the basic levels of education.

Documentation of financial transactions

This is the responsibility of the school bursar but may be delegated to any of the clerks in the school's Accounts Department.

Ideally, all financial transactions in a school are carried out by the Accounts/Bursary Department under the supervision and coordination of the school bursar who reports directly to the school administrator. The administrator may also need to delegate some financial responsibilities to teachers, for administrative convenience. Whatever may be the reason for the delegation of functions, it is important for the administrator to clearly define the channel of accountability and the boundaries of responsibility (Hilton, Maher & Selto, 2000; Ibara, 2010; Agabi, 2013). This helps in the aversion of a cluster of roles and responsibilities as well as the resultant conflict that may arise from such enjambment. A clear definition of the channel of accountability enables the administrator to closely monitor cash flow, pattern of fund utilisation and record keeping. To this end, Agabi (2014:226) advised that

The monitoring of fund utilisation should not be a centralised activity especially when departments are also involved in fund sourcing and in various levels of expenditure. Each department should account for funds expended through the department. Accountability at departmental level facilitates accountability at top management level.

Proper coordination of the various components of school system financial activities and responsibilities gives the administrator a strong base for an effective projection of the financial requirements for various educational programmes and projects with adequate consideration for the inflationary trend in the country. It also ensures that all units of expenditure are guided towards the attainment of school goals with the full exploration of all legitimate revenue sources. As observed by Cooper & Nisonoff (2012), a good budget should clearly reflect an accounting structure that facilitates auditing of expenditure pattern in a school, so as to check irresponsible spending of school fund.

Importance of Budgeting to Accountability in School Management

Aside from facilitating the process of financial accountability in the school system, budgeting is important for the following reasons indicated by researchers such as Nwikina, (1998); Ebong (2006); Leigha (2011); Ruiz & Koch (2012) and Agabi (2014):

i. It provides a working guide for the school administrator and his/her subordinates in fund management;

ii. It helps to check the occurrence of financial mismanagement as every bit of fund is tied to specific school programme or activity;

iii. It facilitates adequate evaluation of school financial activities thereby providing room for necessary financial adjustments and modification of expenditure pattern;

iv. It helps school administrators to guard against unnecessary diversion of fund thereby controlling wastage in the use of fund and at the same time checking school system fraud. This is because the budget constitutes strong baseline data for financial accountability.

v. It gives the administrator strong reasons to explore the various sources of fund that are available to the school.

vi. It facilitates the achievement of school system goals by ensuring efficient utilisation of school resources. The importance of budgeting as a necessary managerial function can never be over emphasised in the efficient management of any school.

Challenges to Effective Budgeting

The challenges to effective budgeting in schools may vary between institutions; between levels of education; between types of education programme and between countries. This is why the most effective budget is that budget that recognises and gives adequate consideration for the various classes into which budgetary items can be divided. A school-specific budget should reflect budgetary items that are peculiar to the type of school (e.g. special schools, conventional schools, etc); category of learners (e.g. physically challenged, visually impaired, adults or regular children); and level of education (nursery, primary, secondary or tertiary).

Various studies within and outside Nigeria have shown that the major issues in budgeting are not necessarily caused by administrative incompetence within the school system but often arise from national issues such as (a) the policy of education existing in the country; (b) national budgetary allocation to education; (c) trend in the demand for any particular type of education; (d) reliability of the data base for projections on resource requirements and costs for any particular education programme and; (e) the nature of the political cum economic environment in the country within the period of budgeting (Habiba,2010; Adejumobi, 2010; Ruiz & Koch, 2012) .

Inconsistency and frequent changes in the provisions of national education policies can constitute a hindrance to effective budgeting in school administration. This is because the education policy provides an information base for projections on resource requirements for any particular type or level of education. Inconsistency in policy provisions can render any existing quantum of information irrelevant and inaccurate (Agabi & Nsirim, 2008) as a base for budgeting. This can adversely affect projections on capital outlays, resource requirements and recurrent costs. A typical example is the education policy in Rivers State, Nigeria, that limits pupil/teacher ratio in the model public primary schools to 30 by the Rotimi Amaechi administration, as opposed to the 40 that is recommended by the 4th edition of the national policy on education in Nigeria (FRN, 2004). Efforts by the Rivers State government to match this reduction in the pupil/teacher ratio with adequate resources included the recruitment and retraining of 15000 university graduates as teachers (some, without any form of teacher training); and a plan to build three model schools in each of the 23 local government areas in the state. This plan was not fully implemented before the end of his tenure. The consequence of this change in policy and its partial implementation by the State government is the gross overpopulation of other public primary schools that do not fall in the category of model schools.

Secondly, when national budgetary allocation to education does not match the demand for education as a social service and does not grow with the inflationary rate in the economy, effective budgeting will be difficult to achieve. This is because severe financial limitations often constitute a hindrance to effective budgeting which requires a consistently reliable financial data base as observed by Black (2003) and Cooper & Nisonoff (2012). In the absence of a reliable source of background information, a school administrator may have problem identifying budget priorities and effectively managing school financial resources. The existence of a reliable data base will guide the school administrator on the enrolment trend, resource requirement and probable cost of running any unit of the school. Based on the existence of a reliable data base, the school administrator can estimate present cost and effectively project resource requirements in the near future. This helps the school administrator avert varying degrees of financial irresponsibility.

An unstable political and economic environment also constitutes a strong challenge to effective budgeting. This may result from national conflicts, security challenges in the country, sudden change of government and so on, which in turn challenge the implementation of national budget and result in the diversion of fund to the most pressing area of national need (Agabi, 2012). In times of conflicts and economic uncertainties, the education sector is often the worse hit as the struggle for life often overwhelms the demand for education and schooling (Offorma, 2009). In this situation, it becomes difficult to hold the school administrator accountable for budget failure; and financial irresponsibility becomes a relative term rather than a crime.

Conclusion

Budgeting is a financial management process. It provides a basis for financial accountability in school management. Budgeting is therefore one of the managerial responsibilities of a school administrator that enhances financial accountability and efficient management of school resources. It provides a resource utilisation cum spending guide for the administrator and his subordinates. However, effective budgeting will be difficult to achieve in the existence of political instability, financial uncertainties, policy inconsistency, and dearth of relevant background information on enrolment trend and resource availability. Effective budgeting which is a condition for effective financial accountability in schools is affected by issues and events in the larger society. Effective budgeting in the school system therefore requires a holistic national effort on the funding and management of education as a key sector in national development. Effective financial management in a school as in any formal organisation requires the establishment of a clear channel of accountability as well as a pattern of role definition that establishes unambiguous boundaries between the functions of school personnel.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are hereby proffered for consideration in the achievement of effective budgeting as a tool of financial accountability in school management:

1. The national policy on education which is a working guide in the establishment and management of schools should have a life span of not less than 20 years before major modifications and amendments can be considered by any level of government. This will make the national education policy a reliable information base for the projection of resource requirement at national and institutional levels. The assumption here is that the statutory student/teacher ratio as well as resource specification for the various levels and programmes of education will not change for a minimum of 20 years. This will also ensure that the national education policy as a statutory document will cease to be used as an instrument for the political manipulation of the agencies of education and school management.
2. Regularly updating the knowledge of school staff including principal officers (especially those directly involved with the keeping of financial records) in the most efficient methods of information garnering, analysis, storage and retrieval is also strongly recommended by this paper. This will ensure maintenance of a relevant and up-to-date financial data bank in the school system. In today's world of digital technology, the documentation of information in huge piles of paper files is being de-emphasised. Information garnering, evaluation, classification, storage and retrieval have been made easy and less cumbersome by the introduction of digital information and communication technology. Every unit or department in a school, that is involved in either fund generation or fund management should be made ICT compliant to ease information generation, information transfer within the school as well as effective coordination of activities and records in various departments, by the school administrator.

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