Ten often-overlooked ways to save on school budgets
Experts offer advice on how cut costs without cutting the essentials

By Meris Stansbury, Assistant Editor

As the harsh economy wrings precious dollars out of school budgets, education leaders face tough choices regarding what to keep—or cut. Before you sacrifice valuable learning resources in your own schools, however, consider the following advice.

We polled several education executives to find out how schools might cut costs without cutting vital services, and we've assembled their ideas in this list of 10 often-overlooked ways to save money.

1. Send records electronically.

Technology solutions firm ConnectEDU is building a national network to move student records electronically between 2,000 high schools and 275 colleges during the college admissions process...

2. Implement online learning programs.

With school districts facing significant budget pressures, it can be hard to meet the needs and interests of all students by investing in staff and specialists for individual or small-group instruction...

3. Consider virtual field trips.

Virtual field trips typically involve students using video conferencing software or using a simple web browser to visit an online destination, such as the web site of a national park or museum, that offers virtual tours through the facility and up-close, three-dimensional views of geological formations, art work, and so on...

4. Pilot 'cloud computing.'

"Cloud computing" refers to the use of software running on remote servers and accessible via the internet. Provided you have enough bandwidth to employ this approach, cloud computing can free you from the cost of storing, updating, and distributing software programs for your students and staff...

5. Take advantage of software virtualization.

To help save on IT infrastructure costs, Indiana University is using Microsoft's server virtualization technology....

6. Use open-source technologies and open content.

Tired of investing in expensive textbooks and proprietary software programs, Florida education officials are looking to an open online-learning platform to teach students basic reading skills.

7. Make data systems interoperable.

Since the Schools Interoperability Framework (SIF) first was announced nearly a decade ago, school leaders have heard the promises: SIF will make school software programs interoperable, regardless of their manufacturer; it will eliminate the need for multiple data entry; and it will streamline school administrative functions.

8. Sell used or unused equipment.

Jenny House, CEO of RedRock Reports, which offers funding strategies, says schools should sell obsolete equipment and unused supplies through InterSchola, which sells surplus educational items on eBay.

InterSchola is working with educational institutions throughout California and New York, with more states on the way. Clients include school districts, county offices of education, community college districts, charter schools, private schools, and other educational organizations. http://www.interschola.com

9. Redesign bus routes.

Carol Miller, transportation supervisor for Michigan's Eaton Rapids Public School District, uses bus routing software from VersaTrans to save her district money by calculating the most efficient routes possible...

10. Implement shorter weeks.

Schools and universities are taking cues from the business world and implementing four-day weeks in an effort to reduce energy costs...