

Superintendent's Column – Work Session 10/18

On Sunday, Oct. 18, my administrative staff and I briefed the Mineral County Board of Education on some of the specific issues and challenges facing our system.

Primarily driven by budget concerns, we laid out for the board areas where we can make adjustments and areas where we cannot.

We started with facilities and grounds. For this discussion, Director of Support Services Kenneth Baker was on hand, along with James Daniels, assistant director. And while, there are no pressing needs, according to Mr. Baker, there are a number of ongoing issues and some that will need to be addressed over the next year or so. Among these are the continual replacement of HVAC units. These units have a relatively short life span and are constantly wearing out.

Roofs are another issue with two schools needing roof replacements in the near future. And it was noted that the bus garage will need some upgrading to accommodate newer buses. As these are large investments, staff was asked to get bids and estimates for these projects. The monies for such come from the capital improvement fund.

Next, Personnel Director Susan Grady provided information on staffing through a series of school by school charts that outlined school schedules and describing programs and the personnel in the positions that provide services. She also discussed attendance and absenteeism by staff.

As we talked, Treasurer and Assistant Superintendent Steve Peer pointed out that when we need to make cuts, the last place they should come is with personnel. In addition, it was noted that there are times when more updated equipment can be more efficient than more personnel, such as in the custodial area where equipment can cut the time to do some tasks.

In addressing the issues of staff absenteeism by Mrs. Grady, Mr. Peer also said there is need to reduce substitute costs. We discussed some ways to reduce absenteeism costs, possibly through incentives and other ways. However, it is obvious there are some reasons that staff must be absent so eliminating all of the costs is not practical.

In my presentation to the board, a PowerPoint focused on our three biggest challenges for the near future. They include the budget carryover which is

currently at about \$250,000 and is recommended to be \$1,500,000; the excess levy renewal, slated for election on Nov. 7; and realigning resources to meet student needs.

We can find savings by looking at facilities, including facilities currently being leased, reconfiguring school spaces, transportation where we have overlapping bus routes involving the technical center and the alternative school, and, of course, we will have to look at more efficient staffing while meeting the critical needs of students.

We need to do a better job of getting the facts out concerning the levy election, specifically, the programs (including community programs) that would be lost if the levy is not renewed, and the fact that renewing the levy will not increase in taxes as the levy has been in place for 50 years.

Mr. Peer pointed out that comments he has heard that the board of education gets 80 percent of the tax money in Mineral County is incorrect. He said that according to figures from the assessor's office, the percentage is 57 percent and while that is the majority, the school system puts \$25 million into the economy and is the largest employer in the county.

There is no way that our already strained budget could absorb the loss of the levy funding and continue to provide the same quality education to our students.

In addition, we would also lose the momentum we have gained with the increased community involvement since the education summit in May. That program has evolved into an advisory group that has met on two occasions and is in the process of developing a strategic plan for action in the coming months. Also, the Teacher Advisory, made up of teachers from each school, is working on a plan as well and the two groups have already planned a joint meeting for Nov. 10 to share ideas.

Having the additional time for teachers to collaborate with a two-hour early dismissal each month has also proved beneficial. After the first one, teachers had a lot of good comments, with some even saying they thought we should have been doing it all along. The next one will be on Nov. 10.

It is true, we need to do some juggling and finding ways to save money from the budget. I have asked our directors to see where they can find savings in their areas.

Targets for cuts could include travel, which is less than one half of one percent of the budget. Overtime is another area that will be scrutinized, which is three tenths of one percent of the budget.

Mr. Peer pointed out that utility costs are an issue and that we could save from \$100,000 to \$200,000 a year just in conservation (turning lights off and thermostats down).

We also are looking at the continually increasing costs involved in special education, especially with the loss of Medicaid funding. Special Education Director David Simanski was on hand to talk about ways he thinks we can provide improved services to students in this arena while also saving money.

We need to tighten the financial belt but we cannot and will not shortchange meeting the needs of students.

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