



OFFICE OF THE SUPERINTENDENT

The Future of Education – Doing the Right Work

By Gene Stone, Mat-Su Borough School District Superintendent

School districts are somewhat unusual organizations to run. At times district school boards and administration may be addressing three different fiscal years within the planning, spending, and accounting phases. The MSBSD did not bring closure to its 2015-2016 budget cycle until the fall of 2016. While closure has not been completed for the 2016-2017 budget, we are working within the developed 2016-2017 budget and, as of right now and for the next 5-6 months, we are by law required to produce a balanced budget for the 2017-2018 school year. We will be required to produce this balanced budget with a number of financial uncertainties that currently exist due to our present state and borough revenue challenges.

When I say challenges, I want to be specific. The MSBSD is facing a ten million dollar deficit for FY 2018, a ten million dollar deficit for FY 2019, and an eleven million dollar deficit for FY 2020. If we correct this deficit now we have the opportunity to position the District in a much healthier way than if we kick the can down the road and exhaust all existing reserves. We are in a situation very much like the State of Alaska in terms of spending savings at a rate that is not sustainable.

As a school district we are in the human resource business. Nearly 85 percent of our budget is directed to paying wages, benefits, retirement, and other potential entitlements such as unemployment insurance and workers' compensation. Early discussions in Juneau suggest that more cuts need to be made in education. Certainly any cuts to education will create challenges that will impact our schools and community. It is imperative that we examine closely all areas and determine how the resources we receive can best be expended. This will ensure our students obtain the very best education possible that positions them to be ready for the demands of the 21st Century.

Across the state in both public and private sectors, thousands of jobs have been lost this past year. Our state budget requires 4.5 billion dollars to operate our state. With revenue of only 1.8 billion this leaves Alaska with an annual projected deficit of 2.7 billion. Seventy-five percent of our school funding comes from the state. It is easy to understand why we have a problem. Our borough funds the remaining 25 percent of our budget. It too has depended on state revenue to further borough development and infrastructure, and it too has fiscal problems with our one-dimensional economy.

Recently, I met with our custodial and nutrition services work groups to explain that the MSBSD would be examining the possible savings of anywhere from 1.6 million dollars to 4.3 million dollars annually through the use of outsourcing. My presentation included information as to what the process will look like and how the School Board would ultimately make the decision. At this time, no decision has been made, but I would contend that it would be irresponsible to not at least examine the possible savings. We can internally examine the potential savings but have no way of knowing if this analysis is accurate without using the RFP (Request for Proposal) process which would allow a private company to bid on a contract. The bid would need to demonstrate that the essential services could be adequately provided for in the area of custodial and nutrition services.

Additional conversations are currently taking place specific to ways we can address the 10 million dollar deficit. All areas are being examined and they include: extra-curricular activities, job constructs, administration cuts, increasing pupil teacher ratios which will increase classroom size/populations, and non-personnel expenses that include supplies, services, and curriculum. Travel has been limited to essential travel or travel required as part of an awarded grant for training purposes. Our Board has a difficult job in examining all these elements. Their job is to ensure the financial health of this district and at the same time remain committed to having the best schools possible.

Our guiding principles for the MSBSD state we are: Responsive, Resourceful, and Relevant. With this understanding the MSBSD and administration will focus on responding to the needs of our community with a clear focus on student achievement and success. The resourceful use of revenue will continue to be emphasized during these fiscal challenges. For the dollars we spend we will be able to demonstrate to our community and state that there is a strong return on the investment made.



21st Century learning is clearly about relevance. Modernizing education will remain a focus for our district and is a priority of our School Board. To step back from this commitment is a disservice to our kids and community. When people suggest that technology is frivolous or unnecessary all evidence and research suggests otherwise. Our economy, our future, our well-being is dependent upon preparing our kids for the 21st Century with relevant, modern, and applicable learning. To do this our teachers will need to prepare themselves to teach this way and the MSBSD remains committed to providing our teachers the tools to facilitate a modern way of learning.

We are currently being led by Commissioner of Education, Dr. Michael Johnson and the State School Board who share a similar philosophy about the critical next steps that education must take to modernize our education system. Despite our fiscal challenges, Commissioner Johnson sees opportunities to embrace and plan how to effectively utilize our resources for the modernization of education. It is refreshing to have his leadership, vision, and courage and we look forward to working closely with him and the State School Board to help advance the strategic goals they have put forward in the area of modernization.

As I bring closure to my thoughts regarding education, I want to share that I believe deeply in the ideal of public education. Early in the 1980's "A Nation at Risk" was authored and it emphasized that our public schools were failing. One has to ask the question if this was true, why then did our country and economy prosper, innovate, and grow tremendous wealth through the 1990's? Youth and innovation coming from the supposed failing public school system contributed greatly to that prosperity. Our kids, our teachers, education as a whole is not failing. That is not to say it does not need to continue to be responsive, resourceful and relevant. It's important that we don't just work hard as educators but rather we do the right work. Over 60 percent of our students in this state who graduate with a 3.0 GPA or higher, and go on to receive a post high school education in the University of Alaska system, require some level of remediation before they are eligible to take college courses for credit. This is an issue both economically and from a quality aspect that must be addressed. Some of this comes from alignment issues, changing placement and assessment requirements, and sadly from what I shared, often working hard but not doing the right work. I believe our students are incredibly bright, eager, and want to do the work that is relevant to their lives and future.



As superintendent, I will remain committed to the students and educators in the MSBSD with a strong focus on doing the right work. The right work is supporting personalized learning so students and families have greater control of their learning. The right work is continuing to support our robust middle college program that is moving from Eagle River to Mat-Su College. This program ensures that students earn dual high school and college credit and need zero college remediation when they graduate from the middle college program. The right work is supporting the ANSEP Acceleration Academy that also provides dual credit for high school and college credits and offers multiple career preparation tracks for students. The right work is the future design for flexible schools that provide greater choice and opportunity for students and parents. The right work is committing resources to technology and professionally developing teachers to effectively teach and lead student learning. Most importantly, the right work is ensuring that our students feel the adults within our schools care for and support them and are doing everything possible to make sure schools are safe, welcoming, and preparing them for success in the 21st Century.

