



School Board Makes Cuts to Keep Focus on Teaching and Learning

By Dr. Daniel Murphy

Funding for the Grosse Ile Township Schools fundamentally depends on two inter-related components. The first component is the number of students enrolled in the school district. The second component is the state foundation grant, or the amount that the State of Michigan pays the district for each student enrolled. As the Board of Education developed this year's school district budget, it became clear that there was an approximate \$1.4 million deficit. This shortfall was primarily due to the loss of 168 students from the district the last three years. The state foundation for each Grosse Ile student is approximately \$9000, - more than \$1,500,000 total.

To develop a strategy for reducing this unsustainable deficit, the school board and staff obtained feedback from parents, teachers, and the community through six community forums and an Island-wide internet survey. The forum and survey results showed that the majority of parents and community would be reluctant to accept large class sizes or schools-of-choice at this time. It became clear that the parents, teachers, and community expected to see cuts in areas outside of the classroom as much as possible. The board adopted a budget for 2009-2010 that included laying off two administrators (the Curriculum Director and Buildings & Grounds Supervisor), 1.5 custodians, 0.5 secretaries, and 7 teachers. In addition, paraprofessional employee hours were reduced, the athletic budget was reduced, and pay freezes were taken by the administrative staff.

The area where parents, teachers, and the community most strongly agreed that cuts could be made was in transportation. Thus, the Board of Education directed the administration to develop a new transportation strategy that included fewer stops, accommodated the conversion of the elementary schools to K-2 and 3-5 buildings (including identical start and dismissal times), and reduced transportation costs for the district. Transportation cost reductions of approximately \$200,000 were achieved and the reconfiguration of the elementary schools will save even more money in the future because class size issues can be more efficiently managed.

Unfortunately, as the first month of the school year concludes, the area that is causing the most dissatisfaction to parents has proven to be transportation. The Board of Education is just as displeased as parents that we have had to make cuts to the transportation program. We recognize the burden that it places on parents when they already have many other significant issues to deal with. Further, we recognize that parents are one of the greatest reasons for our success as a school district. However, the reductions we have to make are very large, the areas for cutting are few, and transportation may be an area that parents can help out with carpooling, walking children to school, etc.

The budget reductions for the present school year are proving to be even more necessary than when the budget was adopted this past June. As anticipated, our enrollment has declined by approximately 50 students, but the second component of the funding equation for the school district, the state foundation grant, appears to be seriously threatened. The most recent information indicates that the 2009-2010 reduction to the student foundation allowance will be \$218 per student translating into an additional loss of \$400,000 to our school district. The school board is currently planning to pay for this unexpected decrease in funding from the state by dipping into the district's fund balance, or rainy day fund. In this manner, academic programs will likely not have to be disrupted in the middle of the school year.

Unfortunately, state funding for the 2010-2011 school year is very likely to be much worse. In fact, 2010-2011 is already being referred to as the “cliff year” for school districts across the State of Michigan. During the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 school years, the Federal government is supplementing the state foundation grant paid to school districts in Michigan by a total of \$478-\$519 per student through federal stimulus money. When the federal stimulus program ends, if the State of Michigan is not able to cover that shortfall (which most authorities agree the State of Michigan will not be able to do), Grosse Ile Township Schools anticipate losing an additional \$1,000,000-\$1,200,000 in revenue (current budget approximately \$19 million). If these events occur, parents, teachers, and community members need to be braced for even more painful cuts in the 2010-2011 school year budget. There would simply be no alternative to very deep budget cuts because a deficit of this magnitude could not be covered with money from the rainy day fund.

The only local control that residents and parents of Grosse Ile exercise over school district funding is in the form of the Homestead, Non-Homestead, and Sinking Fund millages. These three millages will expire at the end of 2010 and, if not renewed, would result in the loss of an additional \$3,000,000 in annual revenue. The Board of Education is currently planning to seek renewal of these millages in August, 2010. These are not tax increases, these millages are continuations of current levies. Regardless, the school board is intent on communicating the vital necessity of passage of these renewals in an honest, transparent, and candid manner with all stake holders. We know that, like the entire region and state, our community is hurting financially and it is our duty to “make our case” to the public on behalf of Grosse Ile students and we do not take any millage renewal request for granted.

The school board remains focused on providing the very best educational opportunities for the students of Grosse Ile. Although current economic conditions present unprecedented challenges, the school board will not waver from its principle duty of providing a high quality environment for teaching and learning for the students of Grosse Ile.