

## **SUPERINTENDENT'S BUDGET MESSAGE**

Great Falls Public Schools  
February 18, 2010

**Superintendent Cheryl K. Crawley, PhD**



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The Great Falls Public School District operates a comprehensive and accredited educational and co-curricular program for students of the Great Falls community. The District is the third largest employer in Great Falls with approximately 1800 local residents employed by the school district in a variety of capacities. These include teachers of 10,500 students enrolled in 20 schools. Seventeen fewer teachers—or 840—are employed in the district this year than before the levy cuts of 2008. Approximately 600 classified staff assist with students, prepare and serve meals, clean and maintain 1.9 million square feet of buildings, repair boilers and plumbing, and maintain 295 acres of grounds. Another 300 people coach youngsters in after school sports programs and approximately 250 people are employed on a fairly regular basis as substitute teachers. This District is the second largest district in the State of Montana.

### **District Vision and Strategic Goals**

The Board of Trustees and District administration are committed to the vision of *All kids engaged in learning today ... for life tomorrow!* And a mission to *Successfully educate students to navigate the future.*

The staff is working hard to realize the trustees long range goals of:

- Communication and Collaboration –  
To communicate and collaborate for sound, trusting relationships with students, staff, parents, and the community at large.
- Cultural Proficiency  
Provide an open and inclusive learning community that embraces and supports all people and all cultures.
- Instructional Practices for a Global Society  
BEST PRACTICE - Continually monitor and adjust curriculum development, instructional practices, and learning expectations so that they evolve with research and futuristic outcomes to close the

achievement gap and meet the broad range of our students' learning needs and aspirations.

DATA - Design and implement a comprehensive process and system for meaningful data collection and analysis to support student, school, and district-wide continuous improvement.

ENGAGEMENT - Use our knowledge of how students learn to consistently engage youngsters at ever higher levels.

- School Safety and Energy Consumption  
Take advantage of economic stimulus to achieve safety and energy efficiency in aging district buildings.

### **Community Characteristics**

Forty-four percent of elementary students in Great Falls Public Schools come from families that live at or below the poverty line; and yet, students in the Great Falls Public Schools routinely score in the top 20 percent on nationally normed, standardized tests, and the District routinely sends a higher than average number of graduates on to college.

Staff at all echelons work above and beyond the call of duty to support students to succeed in these and other activities. District teachers and administrators are regularly honored by state and national education associations for their contributions to the profession and District leaders are often called upon to act as presenters at conferences to share their expertise with others around the state and even the nation.

Triennial surveys of community members' attitudes toward district schools demonstrate that more than 80 percent have very positive feelings about the Great Falls Public Schools.

### **Fiscal Characteristics**

Great Falls Public Schools has been a stable and well-managed community institution since 1888. The district has employed only nine superintendents in the more than 100 years since 1898 and has maintained a reputation for excellent stewardship of the public's funds. The District wisely took steps in 2004–2005 to cut spending to live within state and local funding constraints by closing a middle school and eliminating all the overhead costs of staffing a third middle school with counselors, library staff, clerical support and administrators.

Enrollment in the Great Falls schools has declined at a rate of approximately 200 students per year for the last decade or more; and this year is no exception, enrollment in elementary and secondary schools dropped by another 161 students. District costs were reduced to match the effect of this change in enrollment when the community declined to pass the operating levy for 2008 – 2009, albeit by a mere 133 votes out of 18,391 for the elementary schools and 352 out of 18,422 for the high school district.

Today, Great Falls Public Schools operates an annual budget of \$103 million, and—at \$5779—spends substantially less than the statewide average of \$6356 per pupil. This is not without a cost, however, as starting salaries in Montana for a professional teacher with 4 or 5 years of college put Montana very low in the rankings—at 46<sup>th</sup> in the nation. Montana schools lose many top young candidates to Wyoming, Nevada, Oregon and other nearby states. Great Falls 30 year professional teachers are starting to retire and the district must be positioned to hire the best and the brightest in order to be able to continue the tradition of exceptional education.

### **Curriculum and Instruction**

To maintain this exceptionally high quality of education that the District has always provided and at the same time substantively decrease the current, and unacceptable, high school dropout rate of 24% -- or 218 students last school year—will require focused attention and best fiscal and human resources.

The infusion of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds—better known as—stimulus funds has been a challenging, but welcome resource in this regard. The district received approximately \$6.6 million in funds to be devoted to the improvement of educational outcomes for low income and disabled students. District leadership developed a comprehensive and very creative plan for using the money to best advantage. The youngest investment is in early childhood education where the ARRA money allowed opening Skyline School for the Great Falls Early Childhood Coalition to begin to offer services to preschool children and families that qualify for Title I, Special Education, or Headstart. A parent participation pre-school will also be operating at the new center; and health services will be offered on site by Benefis Hospital, the Center for Mental Health, and others.

Other areas positively impacted by the ARRA funds and employment are a freshman academy at the high school, an intervention program in the

middle school, and a district-wide math initiative culminating in ARRA funded professional development for staff.

In past years you have heard about the struggle to get current with technology in the schools. A proportion of the ARRA money is being used to purchase hardware and software that jumpstarts instruction in that way. East Middle School is setting one example of what you can do with technology that enhances relevance for today's students.

### **Current Budget Challenges**

Rolling over the existing educational program in our elementary, middle and high schools will require a budget increase of 3.2%, or approximately \$2 million. The state had provided for only approximately 1.9% increase; but we are all aware that in recent weeks, Governor Schweitzer has requested 5% budget cuts from every state department. It is clear that local districts will feel the impact of those budget cuts along with others.

A complicating factor for Great Falls is the PPL tax protest that continued for nearly a decade during which PPL's tax dollars were largely held in an escrow account until the state court's decision that PPL must pay those taxes to entities such as the Great Falls Public Schools. The resulting payment of two and a half million tax receipt was required by law to be held in an "excess reserve" until it could be budgeted for the 2009-2010 school year. Half of the money was used in lieu of a tax levy to balance the budget for that year. The other half is available to meet expenses for the coming 2010-2011 school year, but will fall short of the total needed leaving the requirement to ask the voters for a small levy this year and a substantially larger one next year.

### **Facilities**

Despite the quality of the care which district facilities have had over the years, there are millions of dollars in needs to repair heating systems, circulate adequate fresh air, save energy on utility use, and bring schools in line with life safety requirements such as: security, alarm systems, egress/lock systems, and more.

The District is currently convening a combined citizen and staff task force to determine the extent of the need and a variety of funding sources. A preliminary report is expected from Task Force members at an upcoming Board meeting that will outline three major areas of need and potential resource. First is the life safety items which are expected to be largely funded with a federal ARRA stimulus facilities grant. A second approach is using an energy services company to guarantee

energy and dollar savings from a wide array of HVAC, lighting, boiler optimization, and new controls that is expected to allow the District to complete \$8 million in projects with an upfront outlay of about \$2.4 million. The third report from the task force is on the need to commission a study of Great Falls High School that will propose an approach to that school that respects the beloved architectural landmark quality of the school while taking action on its shortcomings for delivery of 21<sup>st</sup> Century education. As it stands, the school provides inadequate lunch room facilities; puts students, staff, and public in danger of falling on ice on walkways at the Bison Field House; lacks congruity between the upper classmen and freshmen campuses; moves virtually no fresh air; and prohibits contemporary electronic communications, to name a few.

### **Budget Committee**

The biggest challenge before this Budget Committee will be to find a good pathway for financing our education expectations in Great Falls given the economic challenges facing our community, our nation, and the world. I thank you all enough for your willingness to work together to help the Great Falls Public Schools chart a good course to navigate this future.