

## **SUPERINTENDENT'S BUDGET MESSAGE**

Great Falls Public Schools  
2011

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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 second largest district in the state and the third largest employer in Great Falls. Approximately two thousand local residents are employed by the school district in a variety of capacities. This includes teachers of 10,500 students enrolled in 21 schools. Approximately 600 support staff provide adult supervision in special education and over-enrolled elementary classrooms, 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 mostly part-time people coach youngsters in after school sports programs and approximately 250 people are employed on a fairly regular basis as substitute teachers.

### **DISTRICT MISSION**

The mission of the Great Falls Public Schools is to *successfully educate students to navigate the future*, and the vision is that *all kids are engaged in learning today ... for life tomorrow*. To that end, the Board of Trustees annually reviews the district strategic plan to focus continuous improvement efforts on activities that will make a true difference for kids.

The District belief that speaks directly to the budget process is:

*District resources, programs, and staff are flexible and adaptable to meet the changing needs of all students.*

Being true to the mission, vision, and beliefs requires that senior leaders re-assess regularly how dollars are being spent to meet the requirements of vision and mission. Activities that are no longer crucial to the mission may need to be eliminated so new endeavors can start to assure successful education for all students to navigate their future.

### **ASSESSING CHANGING NEEDS**

Over the past year the District has been engaged in many listening activities to learn the expectations of parents, employers, students and the community at large. District administrators and teacher leaders have conducted "listening sessions" at each local elementary school

where we heard consistent concerns about student bullying and more access to parent information without having to attend meetings. High school leaders have listened to local business people and coordinated with the local college, university, and Chamber of Commerce in a “workforce development” initiative designed to improve workforce preparation by addressing both the quality and the quantity of students ready to fill local positions. At the other end of the continuum, we have listened to the community tell stories of pre-school children being—for lack of a better word—*expelled* from local pre-schools when they have behavior issues that require trained professional intervention.

### **MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF THE “ALL” IN ALL STUDENTS**

Across the nation schools are being challenged to keep more students in school until they reach graduation. Even here in Montana with our excellent reputation for high quality education, we need improvements in the number of students that complete high school and the percent of students needing remedial work when they enter college.

In the Great Falls Public Schools we believe that we can achieve better student engagement by providing choice and by eliminating traditional barriers.

**Elementary and Secondary Schools.** In response to the challenges heard during “listening”, the Great Falls School District has undertaken changes in the way business is done. At the elementary schools the listening sessions have led to a decision to adopt a uniform system of training for staff that will help proactively address issues with children. High schools have embarked upon a program of training for the soft skills that will lead to success in a work environment, and this spring, for the first time, high school students looking to a future in business are taking a Work Keys exam that provides certification to employers of students’ proficiency in math, language, and problem solving, along with their business skills, attitudes and fit to certain types of positions.

**Early Childhood.** Both research and our own experience demonstrates that quality pre-academic activity for preschool children makes a substantial difference in their likelihood of success in the early grades at school which leads to a far greater likelihood of graduating from high school.

**The Science Example.** Implementation of the new elementary inquiry science program—which is now in its 3<sup>rd</sup> year—has been an astonishing success, and is another example of listening to the community and the students. This program is fulfilling the promise of

how kids who are truly *engaged* in their studies can perform. Be sure to attend the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) Expo in April to see these results.

**Technology.** Three years ago the District embarked upon its plan to infuse the tools of modern business and research into the school setting. Three years later, we have been working on many projects but they are focused on one main thing: increasing student access to technology. Fiber upgrades, wireless implementation, and ARRA funds focus on influx of computers have all been striving to increase the ratio of computers to students. We have seen what happens when students have access: engagement goes up, relevance improves, and kids stay switched on at school. Computers help demonstrate a positive result of the “lean test” – kids are checked-in instead of checked-out.

## **GREAT FALLS PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

**Community Characteristics.** A year ago forty-four percent of elementary students in Great Falls Public Schools came from families that qualify for free or reduced lunch. Today that figure is a whisper under fifty percent; 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 to college.

**Quality Staff.** Staff at all echelons work above and beyond the call of duty to support students to succeed. 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 maintained a reputation for excellent stewardship of the public’s funds.

Enrollment decline in the Great Falls schools has slowed slightly from its historical 200 students per year to 160 this year.

Today, Great Falls Public Schools operates an annual budget of over \$100 million, and—at \$5998—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 must be positioned to hire the best teaching staff in order to continue the tradition of exceptional education.

**American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.** The infusion of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds—better known as—stimulus funds was a challenging resource in 2009-2010. District leadership developed and implemented a comprehensive plan for using the money to best advantage while trying to avoid the unpleasantness of having to lay off two year only employees. Last summer the Board of Trustees developed its guidelines for a “step down” process to mitigate the funding cliff.

Among the many areas positively impacted by the ARRA funds 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, purchase of hardware and software to jumpstart instruction, and the preschool at Skyline.

**Current Budget Challenges.** Rolling the existing educational program in our elementary, middle and high schools into 2011-12 will require a budget increase of \$1.69 million.

The complicating factor for Great Falls continues to be 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 has been used over the past two years in lieu of taxes from our local taxpayers. We have come to the end of that reserve and must now look to other sources of funding to meet the schools program needs.

Another complication this year is the uncertainty of Electric City Power which is the electric power supplier for the Great Falls Public Schools.

**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.

Last year this time the Great Falls schools had just convened a citizen task force to assist in identifying the greatest facilities needs of the district. Their work quickly focused in on the safety repairs and energy efficiency improvements that would substantially improve utilities costs.

## **OPERATING A \$100 MILLION ORGANIZATION**

**The Biggest Challenge.** 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.

Let us remember, as we deliberate, that the Great Falls Public Schools is a \$100 million organization that operates rather like a city within a city. It provides transportation, meals, facilities with heat and lights, emergency nursing and counseling in addition to teachers in classrooms. Paychecks must be cut, telephones and computers must work, supplies must be ordered and delivered. Broken water mains must get emergency repairs; gyms must be prepared for practice and winning teams alike; and music stands and risers move around on a regular basis.

I thank each and every one of you personally for your willingness to work together to help the Great Falls Public Schools chart a good course to navigate this future.