

# Seeking Wisdom

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*“Wisdom is seldom found in a harvest of plenty.” Author Unknown*

Our school system faces its most difficult days of decision.

Our school system is not immune to the crises that have befallen the global economy. The economic downturn, what some have referred to as “America’s Second Great Depression,” is affecting our budgets and will continue for at least the foreseeable future. In December, I recommended to our school board a number of cuts basically freezing all hiring with only the direst of exceptions. Open positions due to retirements or resignations will not be filled. Our governor has indicated that significant budget reductions will have a dramatic effect on a long list of state agencies; and while he has stipulated that every effort will be made to protect public education, that will mean little as state revenues continue to diminish.

School systems across the state have already faced far more serious shortfalls than ours. In other parts of the state, teachers have been asked to return pay raises. Some school systems have resorted to borrowing money to pay salaries; and regrettably, the state has already begun the process of furloughing employees. Certainly, the possibility of immediate future salary increases for any state employee is bleak, if not impossible.

Our school system is financially sound thanks to the wise counsel of our school board. Our positive fund balance has already shielded our students from a number of fierce financial arrows. Sadly though, our positive fund balance was put in place for a rainy day scenario, but our budget forecast is calling for a Category 5 “financial hurricane.” With great resolve, our school board has reduced the local millage rate each year for the past five years indicating a firm belief that they do not take for granted the tax burden on our community.

With the realization of our worsening financial state of affairs, I am seeking wisdom. Our school board is seeking wisdom. Our senior staff is seeking wisdom. The wisdom of the ages will be required to construct the wise decisions affecting our students’ future with fewer and fewer funds.

Regardless of future budget cuts or their severity, the covenant we have established with our students and our greater community remains resolute. We will not retreat from teaching at high levels, nor will we reduce student expectations. Our mission is rock solid: to ignite a passion for learning and teaching at high levels. On this you can rely: our students will continue to be held to exceptional standards of education and discipline.

Easily the wisest, most well-timed community decision was the approval of the Education Special Local Option Sales Tax (E-SPLOST). While by law those funds cannot be used to make up for district and state budget shortfalls, this 1% sales tax will ensure new school construction and that approved district infrastructural improvements will continue unabated.

Tough decisions lay before us. Divine wisdom is required as together we navigate the future for the sake of our students. I must admit, the very thought of furloughing valued employees sickens me. Our stark reality is simple: the lion's share of our budget is comprised of salaries. As you know, your school board and I have worked collaboratively to regain a balance in our school district from what could be best described as a top heavy administration. Last summer, we initiated additional restructuring initiatives designed to produce the best value for the use of your tax dollars. While these initiatives were strategically significant, they now make future restructuring decisions all-the-more difficult.

The brutal facts remain. Our school system must do more with less. New spending outside of E-SPLOST will be impossible. While I am firmly committed to limiting the overall consequence on our administration and support personnel, our classrooms and the needs of our students will always be our primary priority. Everything else is secondary.

I call upon our principals to seek wisdom as they embrace the requisite preparations of the next school year, knowing we will be required to do more with less, with the realization we cannot wait until summer to begin those preparations.

I call upon our teachers to seek wisdom as you embrace and focus on the critical needs of your students, knowing the art of teaching is dependent on the ability of teachers to engage their students in critical thinking, utilizing rigor, relevance, relationships and results. Everything else is superficial.

I call upon our parents and our supportive community to seek wisdom as together we embrace the days of less, knowing our students will need us more than ever.

No one said our journey to World Class would be easy. While the path may be steep, the prize before us has never been more precious. All Means All.

