

Message from the Superintendent

Childhood Has No Rewind

By Paul Durand, Superintendent

As we start a new school year, it is a good time to reflect on the many reasons that our district has to be proud. We look forward to accomplishing many more great things as we continue with our Rocket Pride. Here are some of our many achievements:

- Launching Pad Preschool received a 4-Star Rating for another year. This is the highest rating given from the MN Parent Aware Quality Rating System.
- The 2015-16 school year marked the 12th year as an arts magnet school at REAMS.
- Assessment Days were started at REAMS.
- All-Day Every-Day Kindergarten program celebrated its sixth successful year!
- Galaxy Kids program has increased to over 145 students registered for this fall.
- At REAMS, we are beginning the fourth year of weekly piano lessons.
- The 2015-16 school year marked the fifth year RMS-CES has been a STEM Magnet School, with an emphasis on environmental education.
- In 2015-2016, RMS-CES received the Profile of Excellence Award from Minnesota Rural Education Association, the Local Government Innovation Award from the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, and the Star of Innovation from the Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals.
- The RHS Business Department opened our school store, Rocketc. The store uses DECA principles to prepare emerging leaders and entrepreneurs in a business environment.
- A new RHS course, Machine Trades Exploration, was introduced in the Industrial Technology Department. Classroom supplies and equipment were supported entirely by donations.
- In 2015-2016 the Rockford Rockets had State participants in band, choir, dance team, FFA, softball, trap shooting and track and field.
- District #883 qualified for MN Department of Education's Finance Award for the ninth year.

In the midst of our many successes, we also face some very real challenges. You have probably heard about the many legislative reforms in K-12 education that seek to improve the quality of public education, such as common-core standards, teacher evaluations and, more recently, the *Every Student Succeeds Act*. What is often missing from these mandated reforms is how school districts, especially smaller districts like Rockford Area Schools, can financially sustain these reforms in the long-term future. School funding is one of the most pressing issues in need of repair at the state and federal levels.

In the past few years, this is one issue our School Board, staff and I have diligently worked to help stabilize. Contrary to popular perception, the federal government is not the biggest contributor to public education funding. On average, federal funds currently make up only approximately nine percent of a school district's budget. States and local communities are then charged with delivering the majority of K-12 education revenue. In Minnesota, property taxes continue to be the primary source of funding for education. (Center for Public Education, U.S. Department of Education 2007).

Increasing student enrollment is one way for the Rockford School District to receive

additional revenue to support the quality educational programs in our district. We have seen steady increases in enrollment over the past six years with enrollment now reaching 1700 students in K-12. Every student attending one of our schools generates financial aid from the State of Minnesota. Unfortunately, state aid to support public schools has not increased at the rate necessary to keep up with rising costs of energy, fuel, transportation, special education, technology, supplies, insurance, legal expenses and added employee expenses. In other words, cost of living is increasing but our state aid per student is not.

In 2012, our community supported a capital bond referendum to replace our aging boilers, update infrastructure and improve the majority of our fields and grounds. This work enhanced the long-term sustainability of our buildings and grounds so we could focus our budgets on quality programs in our classrooms. It did not provide the funding to cover the increased costs in our general fund budget. It is important to note that bond revenues must only be used for upgrading or maintaining buildings, infrastructure and grounds. They cannot cover general expenses such as funding staff, updating curriculum, learning technology or innovative programming for our students. Additional funding for these expenses must come through an operating levy. An easy way to remember the difference between a *capital bond* and an *operating levy* is “a bond is for building, a levy is for learning”.

There are times when federal, state, and local revenue sources do not provide enough money to fund and sustain the quality programs schools need to provide. As reported in the June Rocket Report, our district has raised over \$1,150,000 through grants and donations. It is important to note that grants and donations do not offer the long-term stability school districts need for future planning and success.

We have worked with our legislative leaders on school funding issues with regards to the district vs. district funding inequity. Unfortunately, because of inequitable state funding formulas and a small community tax base, small districts like Rockford Area Schools are not on a level playing field with many of our larger neighboring districts. (See the March Rocket Report for the article about state funding formulas and legislative issues.) Statewide, the funding formula for public schools has not kept up with inflation for a number of years. This lack of state and federal funding has caused district costs to exceed its revenues. This forces school districts to deplete fund balances or rely on revenue received from local voter approved referendums to provide basic, essential services and programs for students. Since 2000, the district has asked for community support eight times. Three of those referendums, two bonds and one levy, were approved by the taxpayers. In our last levy referendum in November 2009, Rockford Area Schools' residents approved a 5-year \$395 levy to support the general fund budget. This voter-approved local levy expired in June 2015.

In the past year, the school board and administration have looked carefully at all K-12 programs and taken actions to keep our district fiscally sound. We have researched possible options, increased student enrollment, worked legislatively by contacting state legislators and testified at the Capitol. This coming school year, 2016-17, we have made \$500,000 in budget cuts that included staff reductions, decreased transportation, supplies, and field trips costs, increased activity fees and meal prices, and diverted the deferred maintenance reserve to support day-to-day operations. We will continue to work to balance the district budget and maintain a fund balance that will allow the district to have the cash reserves needed to pay bills and make payrolls, avoiding the additional expense of interest payments if a loan is needed to meet the financial needs of the district. Thus, the best option remaining may be to ask you, our community, to support financially our students and educational programs in the district. The Board has reviewed the data, weighed the options and is seriously considering a levy referendum to be placed on the November ballot.

Each and every year, everything we do as a school community—parents, teachers, area residents, staff and administration -- is focused on making available the best and highest quality education we can for Rockford Area Schools' students. There is no second chance to provide our children with the best education possible; childhood has no rewind.

The Board of Education, staff and administration are proud of Rockford Area Schools and the educational opportunities we offer students and their families. Please watch for more information in the future regarding school funding and the possible impact of a local levy referendum. Feel free to stop in, call (office: 763-477-9165 x4002) or send me an email (durandp@rockford.k12.mn.us) anytime you have a question or concern. Thank you for your continued support of our students of Rockford Area Schools!