

Dear State Legislature,

Recent articles in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel about school funding in Wisconsin require this response. I am particularly motivated to respond to Senator Olsen's warning to school districts about figuring out worst-case scenarios and getting our houses in order. I can assure you that we have already done that in the School District of Greenfield. Our house is in order, although that is a relative term as a reasonable person would see nothing orderly about the cuts we have made and the negative impact those reductions are having on children, youth and their families. Since the state legislature has created a funding system that ignores the needs of students and virtually guarantees our district will have to make cuts every year, it seems that the state legislature should share responsibility for getting the state's "house" in order.

As school districts around the state continue to struggle with the funding mechanisms that are forcing us toward insolvency, the important story is the illogical manner in which schools are funded and that the situation is only getting worse. What has to be emphasized is that the state legislature created the existing funding laws and those laws are raising property taxes and driving school districts into the ground.

In a nutshell, Districts like Greenfield have reached the point where we have little left to cut as our class sizes cannot get higher (literally space does not allow it) and we cannot reduce counseling services, literacy interventions, special education services, etc. without hurting students. The only way we can avoid further reductions, without an operational referendum to exceed the revenue caps, is to use our reserves. Once we start spending our reserves, we have estimated we will not be able to operate beyond the 2013-14 school year...perhaps we can eke out one more year, but it would be tough.

In addition to the media, superintendents and legislators have a responsibility to raise awareness of these issues. It would be worth asking all local school districts at what point they would no longer be able to operate if they stopped cutting and used their fund balance to maintain their current level of programming. Based on a consistent set of assumptions it should not be difficult to identify when each district will run out of money. The list of districts and the year each will cease to exist might highlight the fact that no organization can survive indefinitely with annual revenue capped at a level that is guaranteed to be below expenses. A list of reductions in each district might also be interesting...Greenfield's is attached, as is a PowerPoint presentation that demonstrates all we have done to keep our house in "order".

I do not know how many districts would respond, as it seems there is a reluctance to be seen as chicken little, but at this point I cannot shirk my responsibility to communicate to the citizens of Greenfield. It would also be fascinating to see/hear what every state legislator believes is the answer. The individuals who have created and maintained the funding laws have an obligation to respond to the question, "How long do you expect school districts to stay in business with revenue capped below expenses?"

Since the caps and QEO were never meant to be permanent, it is only fair that legislators explain how they expect local districts to get their houses in order when we have been cutting for so many years. Considering that the state has pulled back on two-thirds funding and repealed the QEO while keeping the revenue caps in place, it seems even more logical that those who made these laws should provide some direction.

Also attached is a flyer we have distributed to our parents and put on our Greenfield website: www.greenfield.k12.wi.us. A more detailed PowerPoint presentation that was shown at our Annual Meeting is also available on our website.

We have examined the worst-case scenario and it is coming in a few short years. Assuming we do not pass an operational referendum, it is likely I will have to make some calls to the DPI to ask what to do when we know we will not have enough money to make our payroll. Even if we pass an operational referendum, it only postpones the inevitable and does not address the fact that schools are inadequately funded in this state. I cannot afford to wait to have the conversation as my responsibility to our students, parents, staff and community requires that I communicate as pro-actively as possible.

Legislators, I eagerly await your suggestions as to how you think districts should respond, and preferably how the legislature will respond.

Respectfully,

Conrad D. Farner, Superintendent
School District of Greenfield