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Schools facing fiscal crisis

Letter to the Editor:

(Note from the Editor: According to the superintendent's office, this letter was emailed to school staff only)

Dear Community Members:

I'm sure you are all aware of the budget proposal that Governor Snyder unveiled for the coming school year. This budget reduces per pupil funding to a five-year low and raises the retirement rate to an unprecedented 24.46 percent. This, in addition to increases to insurance premiums and other factors, creates a budgetary shortfall that exceeds \$1,000 per student.

The impact of this budgetary shortfall will be significant for the 2011-2012 school year, and catastrophic for the 2012-2013 school year. The potential for widespread staffing and program reductions is real. Educational opportunities as we have known could see drastic changes and have impact on every student in every grade.

We are not alone in this "perfect storm." Nearly every school district in the state, along with municipalities and other government entities, will experience hardship should this budget proposal be adopted by the legislature.

The time is now to contact our elected officials and

request that they pursue a more reasonable budget. Districts cannot absorb more cuts without possible layoffs, larger class sizes, program cuts, and other options that may be detrimental to student learning. We realize there will be hardship, but we should not allow Lansing to devastate our schools through this proposed budget.

Our district continues to explore all options for cost savings. There will be no easy answers as we work toward development of an overall educational program that makes the best of this very, very bad situation.

Representative Holly Hughes has personally indicated to me her willingness to hear from her constituents on this issue. It will also be important to contact Senator Geoff Hansen and Representative Amanda Price, letting them know your concern and desire to have a more reasonable approach toward maintaining the viability of our schools.

Our young people deserve a bright future. That future begins with education. Help us ensure defeat of this proposal by utilizing our democratic process. Please contact our elected officials and make your voice heard.

Sincerely,
Bob Szymoniak,
Superintendent

School budget crisis: Another view

Letter to the Editor:

Dear Fruitport Community Members,

Recently, a "Fiscal Crisis Letter," addressed to Fruitport community members from Superintendent Bob Szymoniak found its way into my email inbox. After reading it, I felt the need to respond to it.

Unfortunately, I feel that free and open debate on issues involving our schools is almost impossible to conduct. School teachers and administrators are often seen as morally unassailable in their views on educational matters, causing reluctance for anyone to publicly voice opposing views — most especially anyone who actually has children in those schools, as I do.

Make no mistake, this state is in a fiscal crisis. Who, including myself, has not seen their health care benefits erode over the last several years? Who has not suffered from rising energy and food costs? In real or in-kind ways, most of our incomes (mine included) are dropping. Who does not know personally someone who has lost their job or suffered home foreclosure?

In the interest of disclosure, I am also a unionized government worker, and am facing many of the same negative outlooks in my own department. Without cooperation and understanding between government employees, administrators, and elected officials, we are inviting more pain,

I am not against teachers, and I believe we have many great ones here in Fruitport, but I question many of the basic premises undergirding Mr. Szymoniak's letter. Specifically:

- Gov. Snyder's budget proposal "reduces per pupil funding to a five-year low." So, according to Mr. Szymoniak, student funding returns to 2006 levels? That seems more than reasonable in these economic conditions. In addition, if you want to talk about funding "per pupil," you are now making a business statement that invites cost/benefit analysis. Do we want to go this route? Per pupil student funding has skyrocketed over the last three decades, to what end? Are the children graduating today any smarter or more prepared than our parents, or ourselves for that matter?

- "The potential for widespread staffing and program reductions is real," and "...we should not allow Lansing to devastate our schools..." Using words like "potential" and "devastate" have no place in a public policy debate that has reached this stage. These types of statements only provoke emotional reactions, and not reasonable ones.

- "The time is now to contact our elected officials and request that they pursue a more reasonable budget." Taken in context, this seems to suggest that whatever that budget is, it must leave education untouched, regardless of the fact that in Michigan, it accounts for 30 percent of the total state budget. In case anyone is wondering, the state national average is 26 percent! Like it or not, education in Michigan is going to get pared back, and it must.

- "Districts cannot absorb more cuts without possible layoffs, larger class sizes, program cuts and other options that may be detrimental to student learning." First, when I look at my children's yearbooks, I cannot help but notice the class sizes, student to teacher ratios, and large numbers of ancillary "education and education support" staff. I then look at my own yearbooks from 25 years ago, and

am struck by the huge disparity in staffing. This needs to be explained! While [I was] growing up, my class sizes were typically 30 to 32 (with one instructor), and my school was not a rich district, but was still able to provide an excellent education. I graduated near the top of my class and went on to graduate Magna Cum Laude from a reputable four-year university — in four years. This is not to brag, but merely to question the conventional wisdom. I am not alone. There are other studies, even recently, that have shown that the small class sizes so favored by many teachers do not correlate to student educational outcomes.

Secondly, this statement touches on other frustrations my wife and I have. What program cuts? We already are asked to help pay for basic classroom supplies and athletic accessories for our children to participate in school athletic programs. Again, not that long ago, all that was supplied to children at no cost through the public school system.

- "There will be no easy answers as we work toward development of an overall educational program that makes the best of this very, very bad situation." Here, I couldn't agree more with Mr. Szymoniak. The problem with his letter is that it offers no alternatives. It merely encourages worry, fear and anger in parents and then directs it at those who were elected to deal with a terrible financial situation in what really appears to be an effort, not on behalf of the children so much, as it is on behalf of the MEA (unions) and vested interests.

Mr. Szymoniak, if you are dissatisfied with the current budget proposal in regards to education, why not suggest alternatives that will save the same amount of money or more? Why not look at the school lunch program, which for those on reduced lunches, cost 40 cents in 1982, and costs 40 cents today, in 2011? Many have complained, rightfully so, that this budget will hurt poorer school districts especially hard. Why not pursue, as many have suggested, combining the state's district's educational monies and disbursing them equally between districts throughout the state? This could quite possibly have many positive ramifications for communities like ours statewide!

Mr. Szymoniak helpfully included the state politicians' contact information in his letter, to aid parents in voicing their outrage over Gov. Snyder's budget proposal in regards to education cuts. I would like to include them as well, but instead with a plea for helpful and reasoned discourse with our elected officials. Everyone in our state needs to be willing to come together and offer helpful ideas. Simple anger will not solve a single thing, but does have the potential to make things worse, should the necessary budgetary cuts not be made. We have watched state after state suffering through the same problems we are dealing with, for the same reasons. Let's show the rest of the country that we can do better.

Sincerely and respectfully,
Anonymous

(Note from the Editor: We prefer that all letters are signed, but we do make exceptions for the protection of the writer and family (as in this case) when the request is reasonable.)