

Giving Thanks in Challenging Times

By Neil Hufnagel, Superintendent

Last week, I had the privilege of attending the annual Veteran's Day luncheon at Most Holy Trinity School where I was honored to sit among approximately 75 local men and women who have risked all in service to our country. They range from a dwindling number of WW II vets to an increasing number returning from service in Iraq and Afghanistan. As has been the case in previous years, local veteran Alan Kramer spoke near the end of the program and described in honest, sometimes vivid detail several of the terrible realities endured by these veterans. For most of us, fortunately, it is hard to imagine what it must feel like to face the possibility of death or dismemberment that these veterans lived with for weeks, months, and even years earlier in their lives. What an example they are of the fortitude and perseverance necessary to meet the immense challenges that they survived by working together and relying on one another.

And so, amid the series of meetings and work sessions focusing on all of the budget challenges facing public schools that have been part of my work routine of late, I receive an important dose of perspective. I visited with veterans that had literally risked everything in service to others, and they were thanking me for being there to honor and remember them. Their humility and gratitude for their families, for those who were honoring them, and for their fellow veterans with whom they had faced unimaginable challenges was the lesson etched in my mind and heart as I left that day.

Indeed, these are challenging times, and further in this newsletter, I will try to clarify those challenges and the steps we will need to take to manage them. But on this front page, and in this month of Thanksgiving, I think it most important to focus on the many things we have to be thankful for in our Fowler Public Schools.

- I am thankful for the veterans and ladies auxiliary of our local VFW Post 3733 for the wonderful partnership they provide our schools. Each year, they sponsor the Patriot's Pen essay contest for middle school students and Voice of Democracy speech contest for high school students, honoring the local winners at a dinner banquet. They have also recently purchased spotlights for the flagpoles at our two buildings so that our nation's flag can proudly fly over our schools 24 hours a day. The honor guard also led our homecoming parade this year as part of the FHS 50th Anniversary celebration, a tradition I hope to establish for future years.
- I am thankful for the passage of the 18 mill non-homestead property tax last May, and for the business owners that bear the burden of supporting our schools and kids through it. Again, this is a tax that the great majority of us do not pay. It is assessed only on non-homestead properties that are made up of commercial properties, second residences, and business properties. Please keep this in mind as you purchase goods and services that are available in our community. Please consider shopping locally and supporting the businesses that provide over \$120,000 for our schools annually through the non-homestead property tax.
- I am grateful for the community members and taxpayers that passed the 2 mill sinking fund three years ago. It is providing approximately \$90,000 a year for 5 years for facilities repair and renovation. So far we have improved the heating systems at Waldron School and retrofitted the lights throughout the district through the use of these funds. We are already seeing the savings in our energy bills due to these improvements not to mention the improved heating and lighting. Future projects include replacing damaged and worn windows and doors with more energy efficient retrofits, and sidewalk and parking lot repair. Just a quick note that sinking fund revenues can only be used for facilities projects and cannot be used for operating expenses, so these projects will continue even as we may need to reduce or redesign in the area of instruction and other services.

- I am thankful for teachers and support staff associations with whom we have worked in recent years to create fair contracts while growing our fund balance to over 10% prior to the funding cuts announced this fall. Through amicable, respectful work together, we have created a reserve that puts us in a better position than approximately two-thirds of the other school districts around the state. While this reserve will not protect us from budget reductions and the need to redesign the services we provide our students and community, it will allow us to smooth this transition over the next few years. We will have the opportunity to balance our budget through a combination of spending down our fund balance along with reductions in expenditures, as opposed to doing it all through a budget cut only approach that some schools are forced to take.
- I am grateful for the positive attitude and work ethic of our teaching staff, support staff, and administrative staff alike. As we have significantly reduced our administrative staffing over the last several years, we are more dependent on all staff members to do their work with less direct supervision and support from administration and supervisors. The food service director has gone from fulltime to a shared position with P-W, we have combined two fulltime positions to create a shared director of transportation and maintenance, and similarly created the shared superintendent/high school principal position. All together that is a reduction of approximately 1.5 positions representing a 20% reduction in administrative staff. The administrative team that remains now works even harder to comply with the ever increasing state and federal requirements while providing all of the essential services to students, community, and staff, while teaching and support staff pitch in to help on top of their traditional duties.
- I appreciate the support and effort of the Fowler Public Schools Education Foundation, Waldron P.T.A., Band Boosters, and Athletic Boosters for their wonderful support of our FHS 50th Anniversary Homecoming Celebration. We had a wonderful weekend in early October and we are actively planning on continuing some of the activities enjoyed that weekend and creating some new traditions. I also appreciate the support of these organizations on an ongoing basis to provide opportunities for our students that would not be possible within the constraints of our regular school budget. Their work will be more important than ever as we navigate the challenges ahead. Please consider actively participating in these groups and supporting their events.
- I am thankful for the many business, community and student volunteers who have collaborated with our Athletic Boosters on two substantial projects this year. The rejuvenation of the Piggott Gym and addition to the weight room will serve our students well for years to come. While it might be nice to have brand new facilities through a bond issue or some similar funding, it seems far more responsible to extend the life of our 30 year old gym and upgrade a storage building for these purposes. We now have quality facilities in which our students can train and compete. Thanks to our Athletic Boosters and local volunteers, we were able to do so without the use of any general fund dollars that are obviously needed to sustain our educational program.
- I am grateful for the many parent volunteers that support our schools and children in so many ways. This is especially true at the elementary level where we rely increasingly on parent volunteers to help in our classrooms. As the ability for schools to provide classroom aide becomes increasingly more difficult, the role of parents has become that much more important. I appreciate the active partnership that so many parents play in supporting not only their own child, but all of our students.
- The Veteran's Day Luncheon, also served as a wonderful reminder of the positive partnership that we have with Most Holy Trinity School. In a funding system where each student is worth a certain number of dollars, it is easy to see our other community school as a competitor instead of a partner. This is arguably another sad statement regarding our current funding system. We are fortunate however to have a positive working relationship with MHT School both in terms of finances and in the education of our community's children. While we don't collect a full membership allocation for each MHT student, we do collect the portion of their schedule that students attend Waldron School for band, music, physical

education, and art. We also benefit from the shared middle school athletic program that the schools cosponsor and the well prepared students who enter FHS joining our highly successful Waldron students for their shared high school experience.

- I am thankful for great students! As an increasingly “older” Fowler grad, I admit to sometimes succumbing to the temptation to criticize our current generation of students for the lack of work ethic and responsibility that I remember from my own school experiences. When I reminisce with school friends however, I have to admit that our work ethic and responsibility may have been a bit lacking at times as well. Indeed, while their interests and communications styles (can you say texting?) may be somewhat different than previous generations, they continue the tradition of high achievement that has long been associated with Fowler Public Schools. Certainly credit starts with their parents for the values and discipline that they instill, but our students do work hard in an ever more challenging curriculum and we can all be proud of their achievement.
- Lastly, as we move forward to face the difficult financial challenges that await our schools, I am grateful and deeply respectful of the positive examples provided by so many families in our community. This economy has dealt a severe blow to so many of my friends in our community. These families have redesigned their lives around the realities of lost jobs, reduced compensation, and more work if you are fortunate to still have it. Like our veterans at the luncheon, we still have community members in harm’s way, or prepared to go there, to protect our way of life. I pledge not to insult you with bellyaching and whining about the plight of our school budget and the challenges that we face. Instead, I plan to follow your example by first being thankful for what we have and secondly working purposefully and proudly do find a way to support our kids and assure a good future for them. I am thankful to do this work in a community that continues to show the perseverance and fortitude necessary to succeed in the face of these immense challenges by working together and relying on one another.

Warmest wishes for a Happy Thanksgiving for your family and those you love!