

# Meeting Our Challenges . . .

By Neil Hufnagel, Superintendent

Defining the Challenge: We have been working purposefully over the last several months to develop a budget for the 2009-2010 school year. Our challenges are significant. We are currently working to resolve a \$105,000 budget deficit for next year. The not so simple math behind it is as follows:

- Student funding from the state is frozen at \$7425 (\$0 change)
- Estimated 11 fewer students next year ( $\$7425 \times 11 = \$81,675$  reduction in revenue)
- Increased cost for employee steps, longevity, retirement, & insurance (\$80,000 increased costs)
- \$100,000 saved out of this year's budget through reduced purchases, lower fuel costs, etc. \$44,000 to be used to increase the fund balance for next year in preparation for an even more challenging 2010-2011. \$56,000 to be used in next year's budget to reduce the deficit. (\$56,000 savings)

When we combine the \$81,675 loss in revenue with the \$80,000 in additional costs, we start with a \$161,675 deficit between the current year budget and next year. By saving \$56,000 in this current year the deficit is reduced to \$105,675. A budget reduction of this size will lead to some noticeable changes to our programs and services. While we may not be able to provide all of the same programming and services that we have in the past, I do expect that Fowler Public Schools will provide the best programming possible within our means as compared to all districts facing the same challenges. These challenges are state-wide, not simply local.

The Tough Choices Ahead: While many options remain under consideration, a general outline of possible program adjustments and budget reductions is emerging. They include further reducing supply, textbook, equipment, technology, and maintenance budgets; reducing or eliminating transportation for athletics, exploring the reduction of a bus run in the afternoon, and possibly the morning; reducing instructional aide time not paid for through Title I or mandated by special education, eliminating the costs related to fields trips; reducing our food service budget; reductions in some athletic program staffing and/or increasing athletic revenues through pay to participate or admission prices; possible reduction of the media specialist position to half time; and reducing the middle school and high school teaching staff by the equivalent of one teaching position. None of these possibilities has yet to be finalized. I share them with you at the risk of knowing they may generate concern, yet it is a necessary risk as I seek to make this process as transparent as possible. I need to share this information during the process so that you have the opportunity to share your thoughts, ideas, concerns and suggestions.

The Other Side of the Equation: Solving our budget challenge must not be only about reductions, it can also be about savings. Indeed each dollar saved is a dollar that doesn't have to be cut. We continue to work on this side of the equation in many ways. We are seeking to save on copying and print costs by renegotiating our contracts, we are renegotiating our technology support contract, we are looking at a program to evaluate the costs of our custodial supplies and practices that might help us be more efficient and effective, we are exploring the opportunity to have our phone service provided through our technology fiber connection at a significant savings with improved service, and we continue to closely examine this year's budget to identify funds which might be saved for next year. We may also have some opportunity to work together as a staff to determine common practices and expectations to reduce copying and energy costs. Alone, none of these will cut a big chunk out of our \$100,000+ deficit, but together they can definitely have an impact on preventing some of the potential reductions mentioned in the previous section.

Time line: I will continue to work on refining the budget recommendation for next year with staff, administration, and the board over the next few weeks. I also welcome any input and ideas from parents and community members. Please feel free to contact by phone (593-2250) or email (nhufnagel@fowerschools.net). The board will hold the required budget hearing on Monday, June 8 at 7:00 (the date and time of their usual board meeting). The regular board meeting has been moved to Monday, June 15 at 7:00 where the board will adopt a budget for the 2009-2010 school year. This will allow the board and administration to consider any public comment and input that might emerge before or at the budget hearing.

While our challenges are certainly real, I am confident that we can and will meet them in the interests of our kids. There is plenty of good news as well! Please keep reading!

## **. . . While Planning for Success.**

In spite of our challenges, past, present and future, we are not standing still or falling backward, but are moving forward in many positive ways. Fowler Public Schools are better positioned than many districts to meet the challenges ahead and are doing so now. The following is a list of some such activities:

1. At the high school we have transitioned to a semester scheduling format that has allowed us to expand the types of elective options available to students and given them greater access to experience those that have been in place all along. Students are able to take a wider variety of courses even as we implement the new high school curriculum.
2. At Waldron School, we are retooling our early intervention and Title I programs into an organized Response to Intervention Program (RTI) for struggling students. We are redistributing existing resources to both comply with recent RTI related legislation, and continue to assist struggling learners. While we are nowhere near the completion of this process, we are certainly making strides.
3. Our sinking fund projects continue. The adjustments to our heating system were made in the fall with the most notable difference in the climate control of the Piggott Gym. We no longer heat our spectators out of the room or waste the energy that caused it. The next phase is the replacement of all of the lighting throughout the district, both improving the quality and decreasing expense. The contracts were awarded through a competitive bid process and came in well below initial estimates. This will allow us to complete the entire lighting upgrade this summer, and hopefully have enough money left to address the remaining priorities in future years. Those are window and door replacement, and parking lot renovation.
4. We have a group in the process of establishing a Fowler Public Schools Education Foundation that will create an investment fund, through donations and fundraisers, to generate revenue for educational programs in our district. We have met twice recently, and there are currently seven people willing to serve as board members. While this is a great start, more are needed. Please contact me if you are interested in attending a meeting to learn more about the group's work. No one will be pressured to commit to joining the group (at least not at the first meeting you attend!!).
5. Our Athletic Booster organization is reinvigorated and working closely with the athletic department on two significant projects. Over the course of this summer there will be a 30' x 30' addition put on our weight room and a complete renovation of the Piggott Gym. This will all be done without the use of any general fund dollars. The weight room addition will be financed almost entirely by donations and booster funds. The planned replacement of the lighting in the Piggott Gym as part of the sinking fund project, combined with the unfortunate need to repair and resurface the floor with insurance funds, has presented the perfect opportunity to give the whole gym a facelift. We plan to remove the drop ceiling and paint the ceiling and walls creating a more spacious feeling environment. We plan to remove the storage closets and create two full sized practice courts which are badly needed with the change in sports seasons. We will also add volleyball side courts enabling us to host volleyball tournaments and benefit from the revenue they bring in. While the total cost of this project will be somewhere in the ballpark of \$100,000, the fact that significant components will be covered by the sinking fund and insurance as stated above, and much of the rest through donated labor and equipment, means that actual cost to be covered by the athletic budget and boosters is approximately \$10,000. Just as we must find creative ways to continue to offer high quality academic programs, we must do the same in the area of athletics. It is key that we provide both quality facilities and programs if we wish to convince families to settle in our community, and others to send their schools of choice students to our district.
6. One federal stimulus programs that may have some benefit for us is a summer youth employment program. We anticipate getting several workers to paint classrooms, do lawn care, and improve our landscaping. An improved appearance of our buildings and grounds can be expected.
7. And oh, by the way, we do an outstanding job of educating students in the Fowler Public Schools. MEAP and MME/ACT data being released this spring continues to show that our students achieve at far higher levels than the state average and even our peers in the mid Michigan area. We do have slight waivers up and down depending on the relative strength of each of our small classes, but even in a low year for ourselves, we still remain in the top 5 to 10 of the 35+ mid -Michigan school districts. This is a huge credit to our staff, our community, and our kids!!