

April 28, 2021

Dear Members of the Joint Finance Committee:

As we emerge from the COVID pandemic, I feel it is of great importance to express to you how we have handled this situation and our needs moving forward. First, it is with pride and a sense of thankfulness that I commend the staff at the Port Edwards School District for working to keep school open to the fullest extent possible during most of this school year. Port Edwards Ed Heuer Elementary School lost only one day of in-person learning this school year early on in September as we were learning how to be efficient and accurate with contact tracing. John Edwards Middle/High School did have a few weeks in October, November and December of 4-day in-person/1-day virtual hybrid instruction. We also had a twelve-day stretch in mid-November that we went fully virtual in both the middle and high schools due to a lack adequate staffing as case counts were at the worst. Our goal was to be in-person five days a week all year and since early January we have been able to maintain that status and we have encouraged many families that were fully virtual to return to in-person instruction. To note, our teachers simultaneously taught in-person and virtual students, this was a unique and challenging experience. Additionally, we conducted all school sponsored sports during their seasons this year and we have just concluded an in-person prom.

This has all been possible because our staff has been diligent in following cleaning recommendations, quarantining guidelines and other recommendation on how to open school in a safe manner. As it became clear a year ago that opening school this past fall would be anything but normal, we worked to prepare for the worst and hoped for best. We did so by increasing our custodial hours, increasing our nursing services and by providing all staff with PPE and cleaning supplies. We prepared by purchasing 1:1 technology devices (many used devices) so that we could shift to online learning if circumstances required that action due to severity of the pandemic. In our case, we did temporarily We retrofitted plumbing with touchless features and we retrofitted our HVAC system with ionization units to improve our indoor air quality. All of these items have a cost that our normal budgets and funding mechanisms are not designed to absorb, especially as we worked to carry on normal operations as much as possible. While we haven't taken field trips this year and saved on some other normal expenses, the cost of retrofitting physical items in the building such as HVAC and plumbing have far outweighed what we would have spent on field trips. The point being, while we have experienced a few savings, we have also incurred deeper costs due to the pandemic.

This past year, we started the year down about 21 students from where we ended the previous year. This represents actual students in their seats, but unfortunately due to how the state calculates full time equivalent students for revenue limit purposes it would appear that we were down about 44 students. The disparity is a result of our district having more students open-enrolled in than out. Due to this situation, our revenue limit FTE can be and often is less than we actually have students in seats.

Moving forward, I would advocate for the following actions regarding the upcoming biennium budget:

1. Pupil count mitigation is an extremely important consideration that I would encourage the state legislature to embrace during this first year of the biennium in order to offset the sharp pandemic related enrollment decline, not only in Port Edwards but across the state. For a school such as Port Edwards, due to our unique situation of having such a disparity of in and out open enrollment students this year, our decline appears much sharper than it actually was and unfortunately the resulting decline in revenue limit dollars over the course of the next three years will be devastating.
2. Continuing to increase the level of aid for districts associated with Special Education is of vital importance. This year, Port Edwards School District has budgeted a transfer of \$476,000 from our Fund 10 (General Fund) to our Fund 27 (Special Education). By continuing to increase the aid for special education, the legislature would create a situation in which all students can benefit. As with other districts, over the past several years we have struggled to find qualified Special Education teachers and staff. As a result, we then spend money to pay for the cost of “growing our own” and/or the cost of simply hiring and retaining a highly sought after teacher. These costs weigh on the District, especially when we are transferring money from Fund 10 to Fund 27 just to meet the mandated maintenance of effort required in Special Education.
3. Provide increases in general revenue of at least \$200 in each year of the biennium in order to account for the inflation that we are now experiencing as a result of the pandemic. As we work to maintain our facilities and to provide students updated technology and other items, it is evident that we are in the midst of supply shortages and inflationary pressures that will put a strain on the school’s budget. For example, this year as we worked to prepare for the pandemic we ordered several dozen Chromebooks and waited and waited and waited. We ultimately resorted to purchasing refurbished and used models just so we would have some one hand. This is just one item. We recently did some simple repair work on a building structure in the district and needed a sheet of plywood. That sheet would have cost us about \$50 and only a year ago it would have been about \$12 for that sheet. Thankfully, we were able to find a sheet that was unused in our Technology Education classroom. But consider, that is a cost increase that not only will affect our ability to maintain our facilities, but will also affect our ability to supply students with materials in a class such as Woods Manufacturing.
4. Provide sustainable support to all Districts for increased Mental Health Services. Over the past few years, the legislature has provided grant money to support Mental Health Services, it is time to leave this competitive system behind because it is leaving students behind. Simply put, it is very difficult for small districts to compete for these grants, primarily because many small rural districts do not have need for full time services and as a result cannot recruit and retain people to provide the services that are needed. Providing each district with some level of funding would allow smaller districts to get creative and work with both public and private entities to help provide mental health services.
5. Work to expand the broadband access throughout the state and especially in hard to reach rural areas. Quite frankly, land line phone and cable systems are quickly becoming relics of the past. Providing support to communities to expand broadband access will ensure that all students have a level playing field in order to stay connected to the ever increasing use of technology in our society and schools. In the Port Edwards School District, this means expanding access in places such as the town of Cranmoor, town of Port Edwards and town of Seneca. Students who live in the village of Port Edwards have access to some of the fastest and highest quality broadband in the state,

but travel just a few miles west and students who live in Cranberry country struggle to get access.

We have been through a difficult year. While we have received aid from the Federal government to address some of the immediate needs created by the pandemic, let me express that we are viewing that aid as an offset to our unexpected or increased costs due to the pandemic. We are not using this aid to offset or supplant items in our normal budget. This makes it vital for the state legislature to continue to support schools and to help schools address some of the unique situations created by the pandemic as it relates to school finance.

In closing, let me express my thanks to you for serving our state and our children. I look forward to sharing further with you when the opportunity arises.

Sincerely,

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