



SCHOOL DISTRICT OF MARATHON

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Richard T. Parks
Administrator

David Beranek
HS Principal

Ryan McCain
ES/MVA Principal

April 28, 2021

Dear Joint Finance Committee:

I writing today to share how important education funding must be in the next biennium budget. This year the pandemic has magnified the importance of our schools to our communities. Though public education funding has fallen below the national average, we have learned that our communities take pride in their strong education system and want the best for their children's future. Investing in public education will make this a reality.

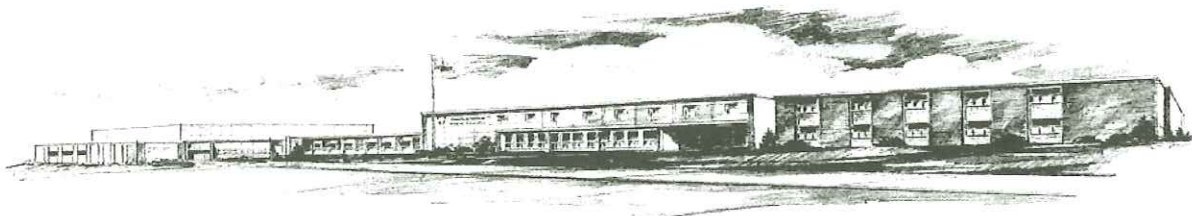
The pandemic has emphasized some inequities we face in schools. We have students with barriers to learning who had more challenges in their learning this year even as we have worked diligently to provide a full curriculum for them. We need to continue to invest in schools so that we can meet these challenges and continue to provide the best for our students.

The Federal assistance provided to schools for COVID-related expenses has helped, in part, to defray the costs. However, we continue to face budget shortfalls. Our 2020-21 school year began on time with students in the buildings. The Federal assistance, provided mostly by formula because we must wait to see if we qualify for any additional money, helped to offset only some of the new expenses incurred. The addition of individualized seating, increased PPE purchases for staff and student needs, increased staffing in our custodial department for cleaning, acquisition of hot spots for students who had no availability of internet while needing access to learn remotely, and technology for our teachers and classrooms to be able to initiate an online curriculum in order to live-stream when students were absent. The money we received was gone before much of this was accomplished. Please keep in mind that Federal funding is one-time money for one-time expenses, and our district funded the shortfall in Federal money. We must continue to invest in public education so future students are afforded the same quality education as previous years.

Highlighted below are some of the most crucial areas for maintaining and improving the quality of education for our students: Special Education Funding; Declining Enrollment mitigation; School Mental Health categorical aid; General Revenue increase; and, high-speed internet that is affordable and reliable, and Transportation Cost Impact.

Special Education Funding

State funding for special education is a reimbursement to help cover the costs incurred for legally required services provided to our students with special needs. We are currently experiencing an increase in our special education student population. Increasing the special education reimbursement rate to 50% of aid eligible costs by the end of the biennium will help our district to continue to provide the required education to these students.



Declining Enrollment

In past years we experienced declining enrollment. We are currently experiencing slight growth in our enrollment. However, this past year we saw a decline of over 50% in our summer school FTE for revenue purposes and consequently began the year with a deficit budget. Though we did have an increase in our resident count, the loss of summer school count would have reduced our deficit amount significantly and will impact us for additional years. It is crucial that the funding formula takes this type of situation into account to mitigate the one-year loss.

School Mental Health Categorical Aid

Our school, like many others, has experienced an increase in mental health needs of our students in recent years. Insert the pandemic and this increase has grown significantly. We want to increase school counselors to help meet these needs. Additionally, we are currently searching for a new school psychologist. A process that may end with a temporary placement for someone working on their degree, thus yielding our potential need to also receive additional services for legal components at an increased expense. Unfortunately, new commitments like this will add to our revenue needs. A categorical aid for school mental health resources can provide the supports our students need.

General Revenue Increase

It is important that our schools receive an inflationary increase to general school funding. We anticipate a lower amount of the Federal funding as the distribution is mostly based on formula. Add to this that the funding will help support one-time expenses while we are experiencing increased costs for ongoing expenses. The cost of materials and services needed to maintain our education programming (such as food, bus fuel, general supplies, business insurance, transportation, repair work, staffing, and utilities) are all increasing and cannot be sustained without a inflationary increases to revenue limits. The proposed limits of \$200 per student FTE is important to continue providing the same quality education to our students.

Affordable, Reliable, High-Speed Internet

One of the most identifiable finds through this pandemic is the need for affordable and reliable high-speed internet. Though nearly 85% of our families have internet access, this reduces to about 50% when students need to access live-stream access to their education. I believe it will continue to be essential for students to navigate on-line education components even when in-person. Internet access will be necessary to access homework, flipped classroom video feeds, and for classroom enrichment. Additionally, with more parents being able to work from home as businesses transitioned to more on-line services, the need for reliable access with increased needs for students and parents will help to close the "homework access gap" and positively impact our economy.

High Cost Transportation Aid Impact

The recent budget motion to increase the high cost transportation aid appropriation and lower the aid threshold for school districts to the statewide average per pupil transportation cost is supported by our school district. Being a rural school district with per pupil transportation cost that is higher than more densely populated school districts, the high cost transportation change could have a positive impact on our district.

We know that public education is an asset to our community and our economy. We hope you agree that investing in our children and public education system is an investment in our future. I appreciate the opportunity to share and thank you for your service to our State.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard Parks". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail on the letter "s".

Richard Parks, Ed.S.
District Administrator