

Innovating for Kids While Balancing our Budget

As a school district, our number one priority is always our students. How can we best support them, provide them with the best staff, and offer them a wide range of learning opportunities?

As Director of Finance and Operations for Owatonna Public Schools, one of my primary roles is to provide leadership for financial decisions. I'm proud to say that thanks to the hard work of my team, we have earned the Certificate of Excellence in Financial Reporting award from the Association of School Business Officials International, along with the Minnesota Department of Education School Finance Award for exhibiting fiscal health, sound fiscal management, and accountability - for 24 years running!

In December, we will finalize our board-approved levy certification for the 2023-24 school year. We are projecting an increase in our levy of approximately 6.1 percent. While we do have an inflationary factor attached to our levy each year, the majority of this increase is due to our receiving less state aid because of an escalation of county-assessed property values. The shift from state funding to the local taxpayer has a greater impact on communities that have a lower property tax base as Owatonna does.

The past few years have been challenging on many levels. Due to state funding not keeping pace with inflation and ongoing unfunded mandates, school budgets around the state have been tight. With the coming legislative session and the projected budget surplus, schools will be looking for funding relief.

Our federal COVID relief funding is being used to maintain class size limits, address student learning loss, provide support for social and emotional learning, expand opportunities for our students through 1:1 devices, and support after school and summer school programming. Unfortunately, these extra funds will only last through the 2023-24 school year, which means we will need to identify new revenue to help stabilize our budget.

Looking ahead, we hope for relative financial stability for the next two years to continue to push forward with new learning opportunities for our students. 1:1 technology has created many opportunities to innovate in the classroom and with the new high school coming online in the fall of 2023, even more innovation is to come. Stay tuned!

- *Amanda Heilman, Owatonna Public Schools Director of Finance and Operations*