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One of the first things I set out to do as the Superintendent of Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools (PLSAS) is to get involved in the community and meet staff, parents and district residents to learn what's working well in the district and where there are opportunities to improve.

To do that, I hosted five "Listening and Learning" events throughout the district. This provided a great way for me as Superintendent, and a Prior Lake resident, to hear what's important to stakeholders. Throughout these informal meetings, there were four general themes that emerged surrounding finances, academic programming, school climate and culture, and school safety.

The desire for greater financial transparency was mentioned at nearly every meeting. Work in this area has already begun. We are making improvements to our budgeting process and calendar, which will include stakeholder input, to help drive our budget conversations. Having a high level of fiscal transparency is very important as we are responsible for being wise stewards of taxpayer dollars.

Academic programming was another topic brought forward in community conversations. Schools throughout the country are addressing the academic and mental health challenges left behind from the pandemic. My priority is to strengthen our core academic framework and support the social and emotional needs of our students to reach their full potential.

Gifted and Talented and Spanish Immersion programming were also topics brought forward to ensure we have adequate staffing levels and are planning for specialized programming that carries students successfully into the secondary levels. Our district is undergoing a program review in both areas that will include parent input.

Ensuring that students are college and career ready was another theme that emerged. Whether it's preparing students for a traditional college pathway, earning a certificate from a trades school or entering the workforce, helping students plan for their future is important to many stakeholders.

Finally, balancing the use of technology with human relationships was a concern under the academic programming topic. We all know technology is here to stay and it is a powerful learning tool that was especially critical during the pandemic however, it cannot replace the importance of the one-to-one relationships teachers and support staff form with our students. Having caring adults in students' lives is critical to their success.

School climate and culture was another big topic addressed at each meeting. The pandemic, social and racial unrest had a serious impact on our students and staff. While we can't change our past, we also cannot be held hostage by it. We must learn from it, acknowledge the

significant challenges that happened and look forward with plans for ongoing healing to repair the wounds that are still being felt by many.

To that end, social and emotional learning is vital for students. They come to school with their heads and their hearts. Whatever impacts a student outside of school carries into their learning day. Addressing social and emotional needs of students helps improve academics as well as social connection and collaboration.

Finally, school safety and security was a theme, particularly surrounding the number of School Resource Officers in our schools, cell phone usage and substance abuse. I too take this topic very seriously. Our Strategic Plan calls for us to provide a safe, secure and supportive environment that nurtures the social and emotional well-being of all learners. We must constantly review and practice our protocols to help ensure we have the ability to effectively lead through a crisis.

At a recent School Board meeting, we heard from Savage School Resource Officer Jacqui Kelch on data that has been collected on the long-range effects from drug usage, beginning in the teen years. Officer Kelch shared with the board discussion that has been taking place with administrators regarding drug searches with canines in the parking lot at the high school. The Board is in support of the searches.

Students today have never known a world without cell phones. As an administrative team, we must have larger conversations about how and when cell phones are used and managed in our schools.

Recently I shared all of this information with the School Board and our administrators, which includes principals. The feedback gathered is very helpful as we make decisions going forward.

Parents and community members also expressed what they perceive is going well in the district. Many stated there is a renewed energy and excitement this school year. It is clear that parents and students love our staff and they have an appreciation for academic and activities options available to students. Our schools provide a space for a variety of perspectives and the Board and administrators are willing to listen.

I am grateful to all those who took the time to attend a Listening and Learning meeting and share their perspectives. By working together, we will be able to impact positive change for the benefit of all our students.