

## Insight on Education

By Superintendent Nick Carter, Ed.D

"An investment in education always pays the highest returns."—*Benjamin Franklin*

The 2024 Kentucky Legislative Session has begun, and the stakes have never been higher for public education in the Commonwealth. Since the Great Recession in 2008, the Kentucky General Assembly hasn't kept up with state funding for our public schools. Public school districts in Kentucky are funded through a program called SEEK. The complex SEEK funding mechanism was established with the historic Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) in 1990. KERA was passed due to the State Supreme Court ruling that Kentucky's entire system of public education was inequitable, inadequate, and therefore unconstitutional. In 2008, the state provided \$3,822 dollars per pupil to school districts compared to \$4,200 per pupil in 2024. To demonstrate how much has changed, \$100 in 2008 has the same buying power as \$139.44 in 2023. For larger organizations like a public school district, that means that \$1,000,000 in 2008 has the same buying power as \$1,394,369 in 2023. Fortunately, our elected state leaders have done a great job over the last few years of managing finances, and we have record surpluses going into this 2 year budget cycle. It is time to reinvest in the nearly 700,000 Kentucky students enrolled in public schools.

Inadequate public education funding has negatively impacted employee salaries (25% lower compared to other professions with comparable education), bus transportation (funded at 69% resulting in a loss of around \$573,000 annually in Breckinridge County), and the ability of public schools to meet the academic needs of all students. Students receiving special education services (21.3%) in the Breckinridge County School District have more than doubled since 2017. These students have a right to pursue the American dream but need more to make that a reality. New teachers in Breckinridge County start their career earning \$41,601 (state average is \$38,010). Some states (Tennessee and Indiana) bordering Kentucky are increasing state funding to ensure new teachers earn \$50,000 to \$60,000 annually. The average teacher salary in the state of Kentucky in 2023 was \$54,148. Inflation continues to stress everyone's finances in 2024. A recent analysis from Republican members of the United States Senate Joint Economic Committee found that Americans need an extra \$11,400 today just to afford the basics they did in

January 2021. Who will care for our students if more of our teachers, bus drivers, custodians, classroom aides, cafeteria workers, and other valuable employees have to look elsewhere to earn more income? Most public school districts spend around 80% of their budgets (81% in the Breckinridge County School District) on salaries and benefits. Restoring the State's per pupil spending to 2008 buying power (\$5,400 per pupil) would result in around a \$3,000,000 dollar increase for the school district.

Record revenue surpluses have provided an opportunity for the Kentucky General Assembly to take steps to address the needs of our public schools. The Legislative Session will cover a variety of topics, and I feel confident that our elected leaders are working hard. However, we need everyone's help in ensuring that our local community understands the importance of this budget cycle. Local school districts around the Commonwealth are the heart and soul of their communities. They serve as the number one employer in most communities, and we are no different in Breckinridge County. The COVID-19 Pandemic reminded all of us about the importance of children having access to a high quality education experience. Respectful advocacy is needed during the 2024 Legislative Session to ensure that public school funding is increased enough to meet the growing needs of students and address the workforce crisis taking place. Together, we will continue to dream big for our children and work hard to ensure they are prepared for the 21st century working world. Stay strong, Breckinridge!