



Glendale-River Hills School District

A community that pursues equity, where each person belongs and thrives.

August 22, 2024

Dear community members,

On August 21, the Glendale River Hills School Board unanimously approved resolutions that will place an operational referendum on the November ballot. The referendum will ask voters to approve or reject \$4.5 million in additional spending for our school district, for each of two years.

Public school budgets are being gutted in Wisconsin. We've been subjected to unreasonably low spending limits for decades.

At the same time that the state caps our spending, it also mandates that we devote a significant and growing portion of our district budget to private schools. **We spent more than \$600,000 last year on private school vouchers and transportation alone.** That doesn't even include the additional special education costs our district foots, to support students in private schools. If voucher proponent dreams come true, these numbers will get bigger and bigger.

Not only are increasing amounts of taxpayer money being siphoned out of our district to private schools, but also state-imposed spending limits on public schools have not kept up with rising costs.

If public schools had been allowed to keep up with inflation in just the last decade, we would be spending about \$2300 more per student per year than we're currently allowed. For our district of a little more than 900 students, that's about **2 million dollars a year** of lost real spending power over the past 10 years. It's no wonder public schools are facing a fiscal cliff all over Wisconsin.

School district boards have to ask local taxpayers for permission to spend more than the unreasonable limits imposed by the state. It is not a sign of local failure. It's baked into the system. As a result, about 80% of school districts in Wisconsin rely on voter referenda to increase school funding, including us and every school district on the North Shore.

That's the world we live in.

Having said that, I recognize that our district is part of this story not only because of these realities, but also because of a failure of competency in our business office.

For two years we overspent without the Board knowing it. That happened on my watch as a new board member. Even though I wasn't directly responsible for these failures, I hold myself accountable. It's my job as a member of our school board to help get our district back on solid ground, so that we can continue to serve our students and families effectively.

The money that we overspent was not lost to fraud or embezzlement. We spent it on teacher raises, we maintained robust programming, and we hired and retained quality staff. I don't regret that.

I do regret that I wasn't given accurate information about our financial status, savings, revenues and expenditures. I'm angry about that. I wish I had been experienced enough to dig harder, when I was reassured by our now-former business manager that we could afford new costs that were being added to our budget.

I'm more experienced now. We've been digging in and making hard choices, since we learned in January of our budget crisis.

We cut about a dozen positions in the spring, saving about a million dollars in costs. We are continuing to evaluate where additional savings can be found without undermining student experiences.

We've revamped and updated our school board fiscal policies to ensure stronger oversight and fidelity.

In the business office, we cleaned house. **We have a new management team to oversee district budget, finances, and operations.** In July, Michelle Brown joined us as our Director of Business Operations, and Anna Young stepped up to become our Interim Superintendent.

With these two strong women at the helm, we're observing competency at every turn. Anna and Michelle are quickly cleaning up two years of failed bookkeeping and financial management, so that we are finally obtaining an accurate picture of our fiscal status.

The board has also been doing a lot of hard work since January to fully understand our budget situation. We have examined prior and current budgets in detail. We have doggedly and persistently questioned everything. We have dug into evidence-based budget models that show us pathways to solvency and success, as well as pathways to failure.

In the midst of all this, I have reflected at length on our educational mission, our kids, our community values, our property values. I have walked up a steep school finance learning curve. And after careful consideration, I've concluded that we need to bring this referendum to voters.

The additional funds from the referendum that's being proposed, \$4.5M a year for two years, will allow us to maintain programs that our community values, including beloved music and allied arts programs, social and emotional learning supports, language and math specialists, paraprofessional supports for teachers, and smaller class sizes. The moneys will also allow us to rebuild our fund 10 balance to a level that complies with board policies.

Through this referendum, our community can tell us whether you want our school district to maintain our current programs and educational strengths; or whether you want us to significantly reduce services in our schools, knowing the potential impact that could have on our students' success, our community reputation, and property values. That's really what's on the line, and **it's the right time for voters to speak.**

Two years is a relatively short time frame for an operational referendum – but if the referendum passes, the funds would allow us to maintain current educational programming while we evaluate budget needs carefully and thoroughly, with the participation and engaged voices of community stakeholders. Two years gives us time to explore efficiencies and come back to voters with a comprehensive plan for long-term solvency and student success that minimizes our property tax burden going forward.

In the days ahead, we will be launching a communications plan to ensure that all voters are informed about the referendum and about the facts of our District's financial situation, ahead of the vote on November 5, 2024. If you have questions or concerns, or wish to learn more, please don't hesitate to reach out to our Interim Superintendent Anna Young, me, or other school board members. You can also visit our website at <https://www.glendale.k12.wi.us>.

In partnership and community,

Carla Pennington-Cross
President
Glendale-River Hills School District Board