Higley Unified School District Budget Community Meeting

Overview

- **Topic**: Maintenance & Operations (M&O) Override for Higley Unified School District (HUSD)
- **Date**: February 19, 2025

Key Topics Covered

1. **HUSD Strategic Plan (2022-2027)**
2. **Explanation of M&O Overrides**
    - M&O Overrides provide additional school funding for teacher salaries, benefits, supplies, and general operations.
    - Overrides last for seven years but require voter renewal in years 4 or 5 to maintain funding.
    - Without renewal, funding decreases by 1/3 in year 6 and 2/3 in year 7.
    - Schools may request up to 15% of their budget through an M&O Override.
3. **HUSD M&O Override History**
    - Previous initiatives supported:
        - Teacher compensation increases
        - Elementary specials (arts, music, PE)
        - Athletics and arts programs
        - Staffing to maintain class sizes
        - Special education and all-day kindergarten programs
        - Classroom resources
4. **Phased Reduction Plan (If Override Is Not Renewed)**
    - **FY26**: Implementing a $5.1 million dollar budget reduction
    - **FY27**: Engaging leadership, staff, parents, and the community for further reductions

5. **Survey Results & Potential Budget Cuts**
    - Phase II survey collected over 1,900 responses (as of Feb. 18, 2025).
    - Possible reductions include:
        - Increasing class sizes
        - Freezing teacher and staff salaries
        - Eliminating elementary music, art, and library technology
        - Reducing elective course options
        - Charging fees for full-day kindergarten
        - Cutting assistant coaches, crossing guards, and custodial staff
        - Consolidating schools and increasing transportation walking boundaries
        - Eliminating the Mandarin Dual Language Immersion Program
6. **Next Steps**
    - Present survey results and cost implications to the Governing Board on March 4, 2025.
    - Governing board will decide on actions, including whether to pursue an election to renew the M&O Override in November 2025.

Community Questions

- How are we communicating the current cuts for 2025/26?
    - During the February 4, 2025, board meeting, the proposed cuts were presented, and an email was sent to all families enrolled in Higley Unified School District to keep them informed.
- What are the 2-3 reasons why the override was needed?

- Expand offerings, retain the programs the community is familiar with, and ensure competitive salaries to attract and retain quality staff.

- Can the survey go to non-parent voters?

  - The survey is available to the public on the website and can be shared. All in-district and open-enrollment families of students have received the survey.

- Will you describe the ways charter schools are funded vs. public schools, and why overrides are so important for public schools?

  - Public schools are primarily funded through property taxes. The total budget is determined by multiplying student enrollment by the state-allocated per-student funding. Property taxes are then levied to support this budget, meaning fluctuations in enrollment and property values directly impact the tax burden on homeowners and businesses. Additionally, secondary taxes, such as overrides and bonds, provide extra funding to public school districts.
  - Charter schools**,** on the other hand, do not receive funding from property taxes and cannot levy additional taxes. Instead, they rely on state funding, which provides approximately three times more per student than public schools receive.

- What have you done to request additional funding from the state or federal government?

  - The finance department diligently seeks grant opportunities; however, due to Higley's demographics, the district often does not qualify for many grants, which are primarily awarded to high-needs districts. Unfortunately, alternative funding sources are insufficient to compensate for the financial shortfall caused by the reduction in override funding.

- How can parents support the district to support the vote next year?

- If the board calls for an election, the district is required to remain neutral and provide only factual information. However, a PAC (political action committee) supports Higley, and parents who wish to advocate for the district can contribute to the PAC's efforts.

- What is the expected dollar amount for the 20 impacted items?
    - That information can be provided later, but achieving a $5 million reduction will require a combination of multiple items from the list. Collectively, the 20 listed items total nearly $10 million.

- Can funding be provided by the community for programs?
    - Yes, tax credit or alternative funding can be donated.

- What have enrollment trends looked like for the last few years and how does that affect the district?
    - Declining enrollment has led to a reduced budget. Kindergarten cohorts are 200–300 students smaller than graduating classes, contributing to this decline. Additionally, many long-term residents are staying in the area, while high housing prices make it challenging for young families to move into the district. Each year, the district adjusts staffing levels to align with enrollment. Currently, the district faces two key challenges: declining student numbers and the need to adjust staffing in response to both lower enrollment and the reduction of override funding.

- Why couldn't the override vote have an amount attached to it?
    - The voter pamphlet outlines the cost, which was about $1.32 per $100,000 of assessed home value. Additionally, a calculator was available on the website to determine the specific impact based on address.

- What plans are in place to replace the valuable social-emotional learning opportunities currently provided through specials?

    - Specials go beyond what the state funds for core instruction. If they were to be discontinued, parents could volunteer to provide activities such as art lessons, or classroom teachers would need to incorporate additional activities to fill those time slots.

- Does it cost money to go for an override? Is there a reason we would not go for it again?

    - Yes, if the town holds an election at the same time, the cost can be shared, reducing it to approximately $60,000. However, if the election is off cycle, the cost increases to around $100,000, as the district must cover the expense of printing and mailing ballots. Ultimately, the governing board determines whether the measure is placed on the ballot.

- What can we do to make it clear that it is for an override and not a tax increase?

    - The 2024 request was for a continuation of an existing tax, not an increase. However, next year, there will be a slight tax increase because the district is currently in the phase-down period of the override. This means that for the upcoming school year, property taxes will be lower.

- With the reduction, how will that affect special education?

    - The services provided will not be affected by the override. The override funding is used to provide additional resources and support, helping to address the diverse needs of students beyond what the regular budget can cover.

- Can you elaborate what is in the “admin” bucket, is it just principals and district level positions?

- The state mandates a minimum number of administrative positions. Currently, the district allocates approximately 10% of its budget to administrative costs, which are below the state average.

- Why is mandarin being eliminated, why not consider combining classes?

  - The question should have also included language about restructuring. Each program needs to be thoroughly reviewed to ensure both fiscal responsibility and long-term viability.

- Can other public schools and HUSD merge? What would be the benefits?

  - It is a legal option, but the final decision rests with the voters. Larger districts may experience some reductions in operational costs; however, the size of the district can impact the overall culture and community feel.

- What happens to the teachers and students if their school closes? And do charters get first access to buy public school buildings that are being sold?

  - To maintain operational efficiency, there may come a time when school closures are considered, but that would be a discussion for the future. In such cases, efforts would be made to place affected teachers in other positions. If a public school sells property, charter schools are given the first right of refusal. Many public schools also explore renting out their facilities as an alternative.

- Could centralizing programs reduce costs? I.e., -arts on one campus, music on another.

  - Centralizing programs does not always ensure equity across the district. To address this, the district has been visiting campuses around the valley to explore and evaluate different program

offerings, ensuring that all schools have access to similar opportunities and resources.

- Why is the district eliminating librarians next year?
    - The media aides who assist in the libraries are being eliminated for next school year.

- Could SpED programs be consolidated to one campus?
    - An attending teacher expressed concern that placing all Special Education (SpED) students on a single campus is not beneficial for those students.

- If an override is passed in 2025, can people come back mid-year?
    - No, the funding does not start until the next fiscal year.

- Is a 4-day week an option?
    - Schools that have transitioned to a 4-day week have traditionally lost enrollment.

- What is the current per pupil spending?
    - State funding provides a base per-pupil allocation of $5,013. However, depending on student needs, additional funding may be available. Higley, on average, receives about $7,000 per student.

- If specials are cut, what is the plan for teacher prep time?
    - Schools would need to be creative in finding ways to provide prep periods for teachers. This might involve adjusting schedules or exploring alternative solutions to ensure teachers have dedicated time for planning and preparation.

- Is there a way to use Title IV or ESSA funding for the arts programs?
    - Title funding can only be used at schools that meet the eligibility requirements for that specific funding. Every Student Succeeds Act is focused on reading, math, and science and is tied to student achievement. There is an eligibility requirement which is specific to students of need.

- Who generated the list for the survey?
    - The items on the survey were developed by principals, the meet and confer team, and department heads.

- Will there be a round 2 survey with dollar amounts attached to the items?
    - The district can prepare another survey that includes specific dollar amounts to provide a clearer understanding of the financial impact.