

Greetings,

I'm hoping that many of us were able to enjoy spring break. It may just be a week later, but it almost already feels like it never happened. And this week, it just went by so fast.

Yesterday, I attended a full day workshop for superintendents and it was really emotionally draining. Our theme was *vulnerability, resilience and growth*. Superintendents spoke about experiences dealing with the most horrific situations that ranged from student suicides to a presentation by Paul Defendini, Superintendent of Farmingdale, who gave us a play-by-play account of the day his band students and music teachers were involved in that terrible bus crash. What I didn't realize was that he was a community member and both his kids were on the trip. While all of it was difficult to grapple with, his having to tell his hysterical daughter that the situation called for him to be a superintendent and not a father as he hugged her and placed her on a bus back to Farmingdale was triggering for us all. Needless to say, it was hard to shift from that to our discussion about our financial challenges and the difficulties associated with having to reduce staff. The conversations regarding dealing with tragic loss helped put things in perspective, even if it didn't make our current situation feel any better.

As we head into a much needed weekend reprieve, I wanted to take a moment to once again reflect on the budget challenges facing South Country and like I mentioned, many other districts across the state. I know the conversations happening around staffing reductions are emotional and difficult. I appreciate and validate how so many of us are feeling. I also know that regardless of how we may be feeling, I know we can also appreciate that these decisions are never made lightly. Not in the slightest.

I want to be clear: we are not looking to "save" money in a way that suggests cutting corners. The reality is that our revenue is restricted, both by state aid formulas and property tax limitations, and increases in our expenditures are simply outpacing any growth in those revenues. Costs associated with health insurance, transportation, and special education services continue to rise at rates far beyond our control. Like many school districts across New York, we are really feeling the impact.

I've also heard suggestions that we could "pierce" the tax cap, and I want to address that. While technically an option, the reality is that increasing the tax levy beyond the allowable limit is not sustainable, especially given our declining enrollment. If our current staffing levels were more aligned to our enrollment, and piercing the cap would allow us to preserve programs or significantly change the outcome, it would certainly be a consideration. However, even with the necessary staffing reductions, we remain committed to delivering the high-quality programs that define our district, including our Dual Language program and other vital supports that serve our students.

Again, other districts across Long Island and New York State are facing similar circumstances. This is not unique to South Country. Rising costs, declining enrollment, and limited revenue streams are forcing school systems everywhere to make incredibly difficult decisions.

Finally, I want to offer a gentle but important reminder to be cautious about misinformation and disinformation. Throughout this process, we have been transparent about our financial situation. The numbers, the factors driving them, and the decisions being made have been communicated consistently. These are not easy times, but clarity and truth are essential as we navigate them together.

It's all been a lot and incredibly time consuming. Work has been so consuming that I have not had the opportunity to see my kids since the Christmas break and even missed seeing my daughter for her birthday. They're incredibly good about it, but it kills. My daughter is in Virginia Tech's acapella group "Tech Notes" and she is performing a solo this weekend at their big concert. She is singing an Adele song! And she's all stressed about it. I indicated to her that I would not be able to attend due to my responsibilities and promised I'd watch the live stream tomorrow night. After hearing Paul Defendini speak about his having to balance being a superintendent and father, I made the decision to fly down to Virginia tomorrow to surprise her for her show and I know she'll be appreciative. Though, ultimately it's me that needs it more than her.

Thank you for your ongoing care and concern for our students, staff, and schools. I know how deeply everyone is invested in the well-being of this community, and I share that commitment.

Wishing you all a restful and peaceful weekend and you already know, it's a real privilege serving you as your superintendent of schools.

Tony Santana
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