

Greetings,

When I had one of my very first meetings as a newly appointed superintendent, a veteran superintendent said to me that it would be the hardest job I'd ever love. In so many respects, he was right. I'm a social person and I love the fact I can not only interact with lots of people, but that I can potentially make an impact on so many of them. I really do love spending time with kids as they give me hope for a better tomorrow, even if they tend to make really poor choices every now and then. I also get to interact with so many grown-ups who have dedicated their lives to help shape a better future by not just teaching content, but ethics, tolerance, and all of the skills necessary to be a productive and contributing member of society. This is all fantastic and I always feel blessed and privileged to be in this role. It's also really hard.

I try to be as transparent as possible and feel the need to speak candidly about some of the financial challenges we are currently facing. I know I have already communicated this on multiple platforms, but these are truly not easy times, and the conversations we've been having are among the most difficult I've experienced as an educator and as your superintendent.

South Country is facing unprecedented increases in several key areas of our budget, particularly in health insurance, transportation, and special education. These aren't small bumps in cost. They are substantial, and unfortunately, they are largely out of our control. I mean it's really been crazy how everything seems to be happening all at once! Provider rate increases, shifts in student needs, and rising service costs are creating a financial strain that makes it incredibly difficult to sustain all of the programs and services our students and families have come to rely on – without having to make some very painful trade-offs. It really has been awful.

At the same time, we've experienced a decrease in both foundation aid and building aid. Last year, our foundation aid remained flat, despite increased costs, and though we had anticipated a decrease in building aid, it has still created a shortfall we actually anticipated and were working to overcome, but then it seemed like the floor collapsed underneath us. Despite what some may think, a lot of it was really unpredictable.

This year alone, for example, we've welcomed 68 new students who require special education services. Of those, 11 students have needed placements in specialized programs outside of the district, due to the intensity of their needs. We are absolutely committed to doing what's right for every child, and we always will be, but I'd be remiss if I didn't share that these placements have added nearly one million dollars in unexpected expenses to our already stretched budget. It's a powerful reminder of the responsibility we carry and the balancing act we're performing.

I also know some people are wondering why we added teaching positions in the first place, especially with reductions in Foundation and Building Aid looming. It's a fair question. The truth is, even with overall enrollment going down, our Special Education and ENL student populations have steadily increased. To meet required services, we've hired 11 Special Education teachers and 12 ENL teachers over the past three years. These roles are critical, and those positions in large part are not being reduced. Could we have cut a position for every one we added? Maybe. But we truly believed we could keep class sizes small and weather a few tough years without

making painful cuts. Unfortunately, the proverbial rug was pulled from underneath our feet and now, here we are.

Our long-term plan to address declining enrollment has always been to reduce staff through attrition by not replacing retirees or positions vacated for other reasons. However, due again to these unprecedented expenditures, that approach is no longer sufficient. We now find ourselves in a position where staff reductions are necessary. This is not a decision we've come to lightly, and we understand the human impact it has on those who have dedicated themselves to our schools and our children.

We are looking at every aspect of our budget with care. Every decision is weighed with a heavy heart, and with our students always at the center. That said, this past week's Board of Education meeting was one of the hardest I've ever participated in. Sitting in the middle school auditorium, seeing so many of our staff in attendance, people I know, work alongside, and respect deeply, was incredibly emotional - though I know I may hide it well. Knowing that the decisions we're being forced to make could adversely impact their livelihoods is something I don't take lightly. I carry that weight with me, and it stays with me well beyond any board meeting. Still, none of this is about me. It's about everyone affected both directly and indirectly.

I know these are uncertain times, but I continue to be inspired by the strength of this community, the dedication of our staff, and the resilience of our students. Please know that we will continue doing everything we can to move forward together, with compassion, transparency, and Clipper PRIDE.

Tony Santana
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