



Board of Education Column

By Greg Clark, Board of Education Planning Committee Chair

Planning Committee Update

In September, the school board approved a deficit budget. That means this school year's expenses will exceed revenues. While this is not ideal, we have enough in reserves to absorb the deficit. Though I continue to believe the district remains financially strong, it is important to acknowledge that deficit spending is not sustainable. The board is committed to a balanced budget next year. As such, the bulk of Planning Committee's work this year has been spent discussing our budget.

The task at hand is finding a way to reduce our spending by 2%, or about \$2,500,000. While firm decisions have not been made yet, one theme has emerged during our discussions: We must think critically about each and every dollar we spend, ensuring we are doing what is best for our students, staff, and community.

Can we survive without this software? Do we need to hire a replacement for this staff member? How can we reduce the credit card processing fees we're paying? Can our bus routes be more efficient? Does our student activity fee need adjustment? Does FPS have too many administrators? Is this project something we can manage with internal knowledge instead of hiring a consultant? Does the Self-Directed Academy have enough enrollment to sustain its current model? Should we increase premiums for dental insurance by \$5 a year?

Some of these questions may be easier to answer than others, but all of them must be answered. I wish we didn't need to consider reducing our bus routes. I don't want to start charging families a credit card fee. I'd love our educators to have access to every amazing new software. But our financial reality is one of competing priorities.

There is no single item in our budget that we can reasonably cut to save \$2.5 million. Instead, we're searching for 100 ways to reduce spending by \$25,000. By doing this now, we can hopefully avoid making bigger, tougher decisions in the future.

Budgets are getting tighter. And though we're increasing our efforts to engage lawmakers about funding levels that reflect the importance of public education, we cannot count on an increase in revenue to balance the budget. We must solve this problem by reducing expenses.

We cannot continue to do something simply because we've always done it that way. We can no longer ask, "Is this a good use of our funds?" We must now ask, "Is this *the best* use of our funds?"

