Enacting our Values– The Work, and the Morals, of School Budgets

Tom Gray, RSU5 Superintendent

Recently, at a meeting of the RSU 5 Board of Directors, one board member shared something that's stuck with me: "Budgets are moral documents." I've turned that phrase over in my mind countless times since. Where we put our resources says everything about what matters to us. Faith leaders have said it. Politicians have said it. People fighting for justice have said it. And now, deep in the work of building next year's budget, I feel the weight of it daily.

Every line item my team and I draft for the Fiscal Year 2027 budget, due to the Board this January, is more than a number. It's a statement about who we are and what we believe our kids deserve.

I've been doing this work long enough to have seen all kinds of budget years. This one's particularly tough. Here's the thing, though: I've never met a school administrator who got into this job hoping to give kids less than they need. And I don't know any of us who want to create impossible burdens for taxpayers, either.

Early in this process, we asked our staff—teachers, support staff, administrators—to tell us what they see as priorities. Their voices matter. They're in classrooms and hallways every day, seeing firsthand what our students need. As we make the hard choices ahead, we're taking that input seriously. It's grounding us in what's real, not just what looks good on paper.

We're trying to hold onto the programs that make school meaningful—music and art, physical education, library time, hands-on learning opportunities, the special programming that enriches education at every grade level. We're working to keep class sizes reasonable. And we're determined to keep supporting our students who need us most—the kids dealing with poverty, learning challenges, or other obstacles that make school harder. Those aren't nice-to-haves. They're who we are.

As we do this work, we are keenly aware that every family in this community is watching their own budget right now. We have families too, and many of our own children are in the district's schools. Inflation isn't some abstract concept. It's real money out of real pockets. We can't ask for taxpayer dollars without treating them like the hard-earned resources they are.

So, as we move through the process of developing a budget for next year, I want to assure the community that we're doing the hard work. We're looking at every expense. We're finding efficiencies. We're making tough calls about where our dollars will do the most good. And we're committed to being honest with ourselves and with you about what's possible and what isn't.

January 28th, I'll stand before the RSU 5 Board of Directors with a budget proposal. Then it becomes yours, the public's, to discuss, debate, maybe revise. I've always believed budget season works best when the community jumps in early. Come to board meetings. Ask your questions. Talk

to your elected board members. This document only becomes truly moral when it reflects all of us, not just the folks in the central office.

Our students are counting on this. So are their families. They need schools that develop their talents, meet their needs, and get them ready for what's next, all while respecting what their families sacrifice to make public education possible. That's the obligation I carry into every budget decision.

Schools are where communities invest their treasure. When you think about it that way, we're the most visible expression of what a community values most. That's humbling. And that's exactly how we're approaching this work in RSU 5.

As Budget information is available it will be posted on the RSU5 website at www.RSU5.org under Budget.