

Greetings,

I hope this message finds you settling back into the rhythm of the new year—whether that rhythm feels smooth or more like fumbling for your badge while juggling coffee, keys, and optimism.

With respect to this week's presentation on our Three Year Recovery Plan, I want to take a moment to talk plainly about our current financial situation and what some of the paths forward actually mean. In short, the financing option we are considering helps us address the immediate deficit—the shortfall that already exists. What it does not do is magically fix the underlying, structural issues that created it in the first place. Borrowing can help stabilize things, but it is not a cure. The real work happens through our multi-year recovery plan, which focuses on long-term balance and sustainability.

There are a few broad approaches districts can take in situations like this. One is to make all of the cost-savings reductions immediately, without borrowing—an approach that avoids debt but would also create the most severe and sudden impact on programs and staffing. Another is short-term borrowing, which can provide temporary relief but still requires quick repayment and often shifts pressure onto future budgets. The option we are carefully exploring spreads repayment over time, reducing immediate disruption and giving us the opportunity to implement thoughtful, phased structural changes. No option is painless, and all require real, recurring adjustments. The critical question is how to do this in the most responsible and least disruptive way possible.

That is why the recovery plan we are developing is so important. As part of that work, we are taking a thoughtful look at our operations—not with the goal of assigning blame, but with the goal of understanding where everyday habits, when multiplied over time, can have a meaningful financial impact. Underlying all of these efforts is our guiding principle: preserve what makes South Country special—our programs, the progress we've made over the last few years, and most importantly, our staff, to the greatest extent possible.

Along the way, some things have come into clearer focus that simply hadn't been front-of-mind before. For me, one of these was printing. In the four previous districts I worked in—and even in two NYC public schools—there were always some limits on copying. In fact, I paid for my own copies in New York City, and that was before laptops, Google Docs, and shared drives. Here in South Country, it just wasn't something we had ever really paused to think about or established controls for.

As we reflected on our day-to-day operations, the overall volume of copying became clearer. On a single day early in January, over 50,000 copies were made across the

district, with some individual print jobs numbering in the thousands. Over the first quarter of the school year, printing costs exceeded what we had projected by nearly \$30,000. No single moment caused that—it was simply the cumulative effect of routine practices over time.

It was one of those moments where the data doesn't judge—it just informs. And once you see it, you can't unsee it.

I liken it to a time when I couldn't understand why I was gaining weight even though I felt like I wasn't eating that much. Then I started tracking calories, and the numbers were... humbling. Turns out eating the entire bag of chips—even when they're "baked"—still counts.

That's not to minimize the work ahead or suggest this is going to be easy. It's simply to say that meaningful decisions require clarity, and clarity sometimes leads to adjustments. This is not about mandates for the sake of mandates—it's about mindfulness. Small, thoughtful shifts in how we do things, when practiced consistently, can make a real difference and help protect the things we value most.



On a more personal note, I was grateful for some time over the holidays to slow down and be with my kids. We spent Christmas Eve with abuela and continued our tradition of having our family portraits drawn in the city. This was year twelve, and I can confidently say the illustrations get more ridiculous each year. At this point, it's less "family portrait" and more "creative interpretation."

At the same time, I know the break wasn't restful for everyone. Some in our community were ill, and others experienced loss. Please know our collective thoughts are with you. My own mother—85 and living alone—fell ill over the break and sounded awful. Her cure? Gargling Coca-Cola and lemon. And somehow, she was better in a few days. I'm not here to question her science.

Finally, it's a new year—and apparently the Year of the Horse, which I'm told is a good thing. I keep telling myself this has to be a better year... even though I have a genuine horse phobia. So we'll see how that plays out.

Thank you, as always, for your care, patience, and partnership. The road ahead won't be easy, but it's one we'll walk carefully, together, and always with our students and community at the center.

And as always, it really is a privilege serving this community as your superintendent of schools!

Be well, be kind, and enjoy the weekend.

Tony Santana

#clipperPRIDE