A Community Conversation About Our Schools' Future
Tom Gray, RSU5 Superintendent

Across Maine and across the country, school districts are finding themselves in a similar place: facing long-term challenges that cannot be solved with short-term fixes. Inflation has required us to look ahead. The cost of health insurance, utilities, transportation, materials, and specialized services continues to rise. At the same time, expectations for what public schools must provide continue to grow, including the state's mandate to offer special education services for three- and four-year-olds, starting in July 2028. None of this is unique to RSU 5.

When districts reach moments like this, there are generally two choices. One is to manage year to year, adjusting around the edges and hoping pressures ease. The other is to step back and ask bigger questions about long-term sustainability, not because something is broken, but because thoughtful planning now can prevent much harder decisions later. This is the space we are in, and this challenges us to think creatively and have open conversations about topics that are close to our hearts: the way our schools work.

Hard conversations are uncomfortable. When we talk about possible changes to school configurations or grade spans, it touches something deeply personal. In RSU 5, our schools in Durham, Freeport, and Pownal are more than buildings. They are anchors of identity and community. It is completely understandable that even the mention of change can bring worry, fear, or frustration. Those feelings make sense, deserve respect, and should be heard fully as we talk about the future.

At the same time, leadership requires us to ask whether our current structures are the best way to meet the needs of students in an era of rising costs, expanded mandates, and evolving educational expectations. For example, how do we thoughtfully meet the state requirement to serve our youngest learners with special needs? How do we create strong transitions for students as they move toward high school? Are there ways to use our facilities differently that could both strengthen programming and protect taxpayers over the long term?

Holding all of these important values, we are now in what I would call the idea-generation phase. We are exploring possibilities, some that have now been publicly discussed, and, in time, others that have yet to be imagined. The ideas initially shared were conversation starters, not endpoints. In fact, if this process works the way it should, more ideas will emerge from the community than from any administrative team.

Exploration is not the same as endorsement. Raising a scenario does not mean it will happen. It simply means we are willing to examine it honestly. And from my perspective, candid, respectful discussion is the cornerstone of meaningful change.

Over the coming months, the Board will be gathering more information, including a professional facilities study that will give us objective insight into the condition and potential of our buildings. That work will take time– well into next school year at the earliest. Alongside that, we will continue

developing our Strategic Plan, which asks us to define not just what we can afford, but what we aspire to be.

If we approach this moment with curiosity and with generosity toward one another's perspectives, it can strengthen us as a district. These conversations invite us to think not only as residents of one town or another, but as members of a single district community serving nearly 1,900 students. Done well, this work can deepen our shared sense of purpose and lead to better outcomes for our students, families, and taxpayers.

For now, the most important thing to know is this: we are listening. We are early in the process. There is time. And there is space for all voices.

Sustainability is not just about budgets and buildings. It is about ensuring that the schools we pass on to the next generation are strong, vibrant, and unified. If we keep students at the center, treat one another with respect, and remain open to thoughtful dialogue, I am confident we can meet this moment together.

The Board's Budget documents and meeting schedule can be found at the following link:
www.rsu5.org/budget/fy27
Livestream/recordings of Board meetings can be found at the following link:
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC97VXXLhRFRjSPv1wfo1ACA