Sustainability Is About More Than Numbers—It's About Relationships
By: Tom Gray, RSU 5 Superintendent

Over the past several weeks, I have had many conversations with families, staff, and community members about the RSU 5 budget. These conversations have been thoughtful, candid, and, at times, understandably emotional. At the center of many of them is a single word that deserves more clarity: *sustainability*.

Too often, sustainability is understood as a financial term: balancing revenues and expenditures, living within our means, or making ends meet from year to year. While those elements are certainly part of the equation, they are not the whole story. Sustainability in a school district is ultimately about whether we can continue to provide a high-quality education for all students– not just now, but well into the future.

And perhaps even more importantly, sustainability is about *how* we make those decisions together.

This year's budget process required difficult choices, including reductions in staffing. I want to acknowledge directly that these decisions have real impacts. They affect class sizes, workloads, and, most importantly, people– educators and staff members who are deeply committed to our students and our community. These were not abstract decisions, and they were not made lightly.

At the same time, sustainability requires us to look beyond the immediate moment. Our responsibility is not only to meet today's needs, but to ensure we have the capacity to thoughtfully plan for and invest in what our students will need in the years ahead. Our goal has been to make careful, measured adjustments now in order to avoid more significant disruptions in the future, always with a focus on minimizing the impact on student learning.

Adding to this complexity is the evolving conversation at the state level. The Maine Legislature is currently considering changes to the school funding formula that would likely increase state subsidy for many districts across Maine. However, as it stands, those changes would not significantly benefit RSU 5. In fact, it is likely that over time, RSU 5 will receive a decreased state subsidy under the new formula. That reality means we must continue to make decisions with a clear-eyed, long-term understanding of our own financial landscape.

In this moment, sustainability means not standing still. If anything, it requires us to be forward-looking and intentional about where we invest. We must ensure that we are able to offer competitive and fair compensation so we can attract and retain excellent educators. We must continue to maintain and improve our facilities so that students learn in safe, supportive environments. And we must be responsive to the evolving needs of our learners, including developing programs and opportunities that prepare them for a rapidly changing world.

These are not optional aspirations; they are essential investments if we want our schools to remain strong and relevant. And they must be balanced to ensure we can sustain them over time.

That is why sustainability cannot be defined by numbers alone. As a district, our capacity for sustainability derives directly from the strength of our collaboration. Fundamentally, sustainability is about relationships.

It is about engaging in the hard work of making decisions together as a community. It is about taking stock of what we value, placing those values into conversation with one another, and making space for perspectives that may differ from our own. It requires curiosity, humility, and a willingness to fairly challenge our own assumptions as we listen to others.

And ultimately, it means that even when we do not fully agree, we can walk away from these conversations having listened well, having treated one another with respect, and still able to shake hands. That kind of sustainability, the kind grounded in trust and relationships, is what allows a community to move forward, even through difficult decisions.

None of this diminishes the reality that this year's choices are hard. They are hard for families, for staff, and for the Board. There are no perfect answers– only thoughtful ones that attempt to balance competing priorities while keeping students at the center.

I remain deeply grateful for the engagement of our community. The questions, concerns, and ideas that have been shared reflect a deep commitment to our schools and to one another. That commitment is one of our greatest strengths.

Sustainability is not about doing less for students. It is about ensuring that we can continue to do what matters most while also fostering the relationships that make this work possible.

Because in the end, sustainability is not just about dollars and numbers.

It is about people. It is about community.

It is about how we move forward together.