Looking Ahead Together in RSU 5

Tom Gray, RSU5 Superintendent

As we head toward the June 9 Budget Validation Referendum, I've been reflecting on just how much has happened in RSU 5 over the past year.

In education, it's easy to get consumed by the immediate work in front of us. Every day brings new challenges, new opportunities, and new needs from students, staff, and families. That's as it should be. Schools are, after all, about the children who walk through our doors every morning.

At the same time, one of our responsibilities as a district is to keep an eye on the horizon. This year, we've spent a great deal of time doing exactly that.

Over the past year, students, staff, families, community members, administrators, and School Board members have worked together to create a new Strategic Plan for RSU 5. While the document itself is important, what matters most is the thinking behind it. The plan gives us a shared vision for where we want to go and helps ensure that our decisions today support the future we want for our students tomorrow.

The process challenged us to think beyond the next school year and ask bigger questions. What skills will our students need in the future? How do we continue improving student achievement while also supporting wellness and belonging? How do we attract and retain excellent staff? How do we strengthen the partnership between our schools and the communities we serve? Those conversations have led to a plan that is both ambitious and practical. More importantly, it gives us a roadmap for moving forward together.

One of the lessons I've learned over the years is that creating a plan is often the easy part. The harder work comes in making sure it stays alive. That's why we're also establishing a Strategic Plan Oversight Committee made up of representatives from across the district and community. Teachers, support staff, administrators, students, parents, community members, and board representatives will all have a seat at the table. Their role will be to help monitor progress, gather feedback, identify challenges, and make sure the plan remains something we actively use rather than something we simply completed. The goal is straightforward: if we say something is important, we should be able to show how we're making progress toward it.

At the same time, we're beginning another important conversation about the future of our district.

Like school districts across Maine, RSU 5 is operating in a rapidly changing environment. Enrollment patterns are shifting. Workforce challenges continue. Expectations for schools are evolving. The financial pressures facing public education are real. Because of that, next year we will begin a formal study of district systems and long-term sustainability. This work is not about starting with conclusions already in mind. It is about gathering information, asking good questions, and making sure we understand both the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead.

Good organizations don't wait for problems to arrive before they start planning. They look ahead, study trends, and make thoughtful decisions before circumstances force their hand. That's exactly what we intend to do. When I look back on this year, what stands out is not any single initiative. It's the fact that we have begun putting pieces in place that will help guide the district for years to come.

We've engaged in candid, productive conversations about our finances and our priorities. We've continued rich conversations about teaching and learning. We've examined our approach to district leadership. We've developed a strategic plan with broad community input. We're creating systems to monitor progress and hold ourselves accountable. And we're preparing to take a careful look at how we can ensure the long-term sustainability of our schools.

All of that work is connected.

The budget that voters will consider on June 9 supports these efforts. It supports the students in our classrooms today while also helping us build the foundation for tomorrow. It reflects a commitment to responsible stewardship, thoughtful planning, and continuous improvement. No budget is perfect, and every budget requires balancing competing priorities. We recognize the financial realities facing our communities, and we take seriously our responsibility to use taxpayer dollars wisely. At the same time, we have an obligation to keep moving forward. And the budget we present to the voters, in combination with our revised Strategic Plan and our deep dive into systems and sustainability, positions us to continue to grow our district to meet the needs of today's and tomorrow's children.

The future of RSU 5 won't be shaped by any single budget, strategic plan, committee, or study. It will be shaped by thousands of decisions made over many years by people who care deeply about this community and its schools.

This year's budget is one of those decisions.

I hope voters will take the opportunity to support it on June 9 and continue the work of building a strong future for the students and communities of RSU 5.