



LEADERSHIP LENS

Dr. Douglas Hendrix Sr.

Superintendent/CEO of Schools

When the Schoolhouse Goes to the Grocery Store

October 3, 2026

There is a moment many families know well. You stand at the grocery store register looking at bags that seem lighter than they used to be while the number on the screen is considerably heavier. The milk is not more nutritious. The electricity does not shine brighter because the bill increased. Insurance costs more without making us feel more insured. Inflation does not knock before entering a home. It simply takes a seat at the kitchen table and begins eating from the family budget.

I know that feeling, and I will not pretend otherwise because I now sit in the Superintendent's chair. Long before I was responsible for a school district budget, I knew what it meant to count what remained after the bills were paid. I remember being a young teacher, educated and employed, yet still discovering that there could be too much month left at the end of the money. Those memories are why I believe government must handle other people's money with humility. Every dollar we receive belonged to someone before it reached us.

There is a parallel between the household and the schoolhouse that deserves our attention. The same inflation that walked through your front door has walked through ours. We buy fuel, electricity, insurance, technology, books, instructional materials, equipment, and supplies. We maintain buildings, repair buses, cool classrooms, protect campuses, and employ the people who teach and care for our children. A school bus does not receive a public-school discount at the fuel pump, and an HVAC part does not cost less because children are waiting for the classroom to cool. The cost of living has increased, and so has the cost of educating a child.

Responsible families do not respond to rising costs by immediately asking for more money. They look at spending first. They postpone purchases, eliminate unnecessary expenses, distinguish wants from needs, and stretch what they have. A responsible school district should do the same. We have reduced budgets, tightened spending, examined staffing and positions, reconsidered resources, and searched for savings. That discipline must continue regardless of the millage rate.

But every household eventually discovers that there is a difference between cutting waste and cutting what the family needs. You can postpone a vacation, but not a leaking roof forever. You can eat out less, but you cannot stop buying groceries. Wisdom is not simply spending less. Wisdom is knowing what can be reduced, what can wait, and what must be protected. The schoolhouse faces that same distinction. There is a difference between trimming fat and cutting muscle.

The proposed millage rate moves from 19.6 to 20.0 mills. For a home with an unchanged fair-market value of \$250,000 and a \$100,000 assessed value, the district's example shows an increase of approximately \$36 annually, or \$3 per month. I will not call that "only \$3." It is your money. Three dollars matters when groceries, insurance, utilities, housing, and everything else are competing for the same paycheck. Government should never describe someone else's money as insignificant simply because the number appears small on our spreadsheet.

The larger question is what happens when a community puts those individual dollars together. Most families cannot purchase a school bus, employ a teacher, maintain a science laboratory, hire a school resource officer, operate a media center, provide special education services, or maintain athletic and band programs on their own. Together, we can do what almost none of us could do individually. That is one of the oldest promises of public education: we carry together what would be impossible to carry alone.

Clayton faces an additional financial reality. We are one of Georgia's largest school districts, yet our local property-tax base is considerably smaller than those of the other large districts in the state's comparison. Clayton generates approximately \$4,848 in local maintenance and operations revenue per student, the lowest amount among the ten large districts shown in our analysis. Yet buses, electricity, computers, insurance, fuel, and qualified employees do not cost less simply because our local tax base produces less.



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I understand the community's frustration because property values can rise on paper without a family feeling richer at the kitchen table. You cannot buy groceries with the appraised value of your bedroom. You cannot put part of your home's equity into the gas tank on Tuesday morning. That is why this conversation cannot become government talking past the people who pay the bills. A tax bill is not merely a calculation to a homeowner. It is money that has already been assigned somewhere else in a family's life.

I also ask our community to picture another table. A teacher sits there after children have gone home. The lights are still burning, the air is still running, a custodian will soon clean the room, and a bus will return tomorrow morning. Behind that single classroom is an entire network of people and services that make education possible. Our FY2027 General Fund budget is \$744.3 million, with \$535 million directed to teaching and learning, while salaries and benefits account for \$637.9 million. A school district budget may appear to be columns of numbers, but behind those numbers are people doing work for children.

This is where the household and schoolhouse meet. Both must resist waste. Both must distinguish wants from needs. Both must make difficult choices when prices rise. Both eventually discover that discipline cannot make yesterday's dollar purchase tomorrow's necessities. Sometimes a family can tighten its belt. Sometimes it must acknowledge that the things its children genuinely need simply cost more than they used to.

For me, this is where "the children eat first" becomes more than a phrase. Children did not create inflation, determine property assessments, establish the tax digest, or set the price of fuel and electricity. They simply arrive every morning carrying an extraordinary assumption: the adults have figured it out. They expect the bus to come, the lights to turn on, the building to be safe, and a qualified adult to be waiting to teach them. Children live inside decisions they never got to make.

That is why I welcome the community's questions. Ask where the money goes. Ask what we have cut. Ask whether contracts produce value. Ask whether positions are necessary. Ask whether programs work. Ask whether academic results are improving. Public money deserves public scrutiny. Accountability is part of the trust between a school system and the community that supports it.

I simply ask that we place everything on the same kitchen table. Put the tax bill there. Put inflation there. Put the family budget there. Put district spending there. Put our responsibility to eliminate waste there. Put the cost of buses, classrooms, safety, employees, utilities, and facilities there. Then place a child's future on that table too.

Inflation has two addresses in Clayton County. One is your house, and the other is the schoolhouse. Families are stretching dollars at one, and we must stretch them at the other. Neither should waste. Neither should confuse wants with needs. Neither can indefinitely cut its way around the rising cost of necessities.

Somewhere between those two houses stands a child who belongs to all of our future. The children eat first because the future always arrives hungry.

Respectfully,
Doug

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