

Media Release - School Operations 2/14/24

Dear Community Members,

There are many systems in place in the operation of a School District. The operational categories range from staffing and professional development to food service, academic programming, extracurricular programming, technology maintenance, safety and security, utilities, curriculum and library services.

The District currently employs 30 professional staff and 13 support staff and in 2024-25 will be back to pre-pandemic staffing levels with enrollment projection of around 268. Salaries and benefits currently makeup about 70% of the Districts expenditures; the average for the state of Wisconsin is approximately 80-85%.

The District has had increasing turnover in professional staff with 26% turnover in 2018-19, 27% in 2019-20, 31% in 2020-21 and 32% in 2021-22. In 2022-23 there was a decrease to 21% turnover however, one of those positions was cut, one was a retirement, and two were terminated. Taking that into consideration, one could estimate the turnover to be around 4%. It is of utmost importance that the District attract and retain quality staff as the teacher has the greatest impact on student achievement.

Of particular concern is the amount of turnover in our middle school staff. In 2018-19 all 3 MS teachers left, in 2019-20 two MS teachers left, in 2020-21 all 3 MS teachers left, in 2021-22 two MS teachers left and in 2022-23 one MS teacher left. These are formative years for executive functioning development which requires strong student/teacher relationships. It becomes increasingly difficult for students to build trusting relationships when they don't believe/trust that the teacher will stay. The District has had 5 different band teachers in 5 years.

The operation of the Districts Food Service program encompasses not only the purchasing of food and supplies but also the equipment needed to run the kitchen. Although the Food Service Program offers free breakfast and lunch to all students utilizing the Community Eligibility Provision program, the reimbursement rates are between \$0.50 to \$2.67 per breakfast and \$0.87 to \$4.43 per lunch. The cost of food has increased by 5.8% in 2023 (USDA Research) making it increasingly difficult to cover the expenses of the FS program. An analysis of the CEP program has revealed that the benefits to our students of continuing the program far outweigh the financial impact on our families if the District were to discontinue with CEP.

Curriculum includes textbooks, learning materials, classroom equipment and supplies. These programs are updated on a cycle and aligned with state standards. These items have increased substantially ranging from 8.6% to 29% depending on the item (CNBC Economy/Inflation). The District's new ELA and Math programs for grades K-10 were purchased out of grant funds.

Purchasing a new district wide curriculum is very expensive. Textbook costs have increased by about 1.4% from 2020-2023 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics).

Academic programming includes core courses and electives. The District has single section classes except for 6th and 9th grade (but only for ELA and Math); we are required to offer PE, Music, Business, and Tech Ed, other electives are Art, Band and Choir. Mellen also offers Spanish via distance learning as we can't afford to hire a Spanish teacher. The state has mandated that school districts provide each HS student up to 18 credits through Start College Now and Early College Credit Programming. The District is also mandated to provide Academic and Career Planning for all students in grades 6 - 12. Equitable Multilevel Systems of Support include Positive Behavior Intervention Systems and Response to Intervention for math and reading are also required.

Special Education services are required by the Federal Government. These include not only academic support but also services such as occupation therapy, physical therapy and speech and language. With increasing costs for special education services and only a reimbursement rate of 33% the District has seen an increase in the Fund 10 to Fund 27 transfer to cover these expenses.

Extracurricular activities include athletics and student organizations. These activities are vital to the development of the whole child and providing a well-rounded education. The cost of these programs is a very small part of the overall budget. We are fortunate to have grant funding to support the Digger Center and OST programs.

The District is down to 3 bus routes and due to the size of the District, there is really no possibility of decreasing further. Transportation accounts for approximately 4.48% of Fund 10 expenses.

Keeping up with technology is necessary to provide our students with the necessary tools to be successful in the 21st Century. The most recent fleet of CB's was actually purchased with grant funds as major cuts were made to the preliminary budget for 23-24. The 5 year Technology plan and budget included upgrading the obsolete Smartboards with Clevertouch Boards; 5 of the 6 Clevertouch the District currently owns were purchased through grant funds. We are currently updating the PA system as our current system is antiquated and there are potential safety concerns since it doesn't not broadcast in all zones of the facility. In addition, the District has completed a great deal of work in the area of Cyber Security by developing a Critical Response Plan in the event of a Cyber attack on the District.

Beginning in 2020, the District began addressing some of the deferred maintenance of the facility such as: updating the kitchen and Science labs (both grant funded), chimney removal and north roof replacement replacement of fans in large gym (Esser funded), 2nd & 3rd floor tile, epoxy flooring (Esser funded); 2nd floor lockers, carpet/tile replacement (Esser funded), Door Replacement B, Bathroom Remodel Elementary, Main Entrance remodel (grant funded), Door Replacement H, Roof replacement door H. Projects that have not been addressed yet include: the back parking lot, the 1910 building restoration, the river parking lot, the floor in the small gym, second floor bathrooms, classroom unit ventilators, Tech Ed dust collector, Roof replacement of elementary and library, VCT flooring in Entrance D & E, roof replacement of large gym and Tech Ed shop just to name a few. Facilities needs will be discussed in greater detail at the March Community Forum meetings.

There are several areas that we have upgraded regarding safety and security as previously mentioned; however, the Ground Mount Transformer by door H still needs to be installed, a Door alarm upgrade and panic button, and updating the mounted log lighting in the back lot.

Utilities are an area that the District has little control over. Natural gas had increased substantially in 2022-23 but seems to be trending downward as of late;

- Electricity – From 21/22 to 22/23 (actual costs) - increase 13.25%
- Garbage - From 21/22 to 22/23 (actual costs) - increase 15.84%
- Water - From 21/22 to 22/23 (actual costs) - increase 8.80%
- Sewer - From 21/22 to 22/23 (actual costs) - increase 12.50%

Research has shown that teacher quality has the greatest impact on student achievement. For teachers to continue to be as effective as possible, they continually expand their knowledge and skills to implement the best instructional practices. There are also several mandatory trainings required by the State and DPI such as Child Abuse and Neglect Training.

Library services include the maintenance and update of the collection along with library instructional support. In the past our Librarian was a purchased service through CESA 12; they were not able to provide this service this year so we are working on certification for one of our current employees.

Budgeted revenues for 23-24 Fund 10 are \$4,535,426; budgeted expenses for 23-24 are \$4,854,766; the difference creates the projected deficit of \$319,340. The current deficit is made up of these very operational expenses. There are no capital improvements included in the projections that have been presented. The 24-25 projected revenues for Fund 10 are \$4,162,559 (without the referendum); projected expenses for 24-25 are \$4,456,818; (this includes an assumed 2% increase on salaries) the difference creates the projected deficit of \$294,259. This is \$20,000 less than the projection presented at the community forum on 1/31/24 due to an additional cut.

Again, this projected deficit is made up of these very operational expenses. There are no capital improvements included in the projections that have been presented.

The District will continue to investigate areas for possible cuts. I will continue to advocate for increased funding for schools with the state legislators. The hard truth is that without adequate funding from the state, the District will most likely ask the taxpayers for authority to exceed the revenue limit in order to continue to provide current programming.

As always, I welcome any feedback by phone call, email, or via the public comment link of the school website. <https://www.mellendiggers.org/district/your-questions-answered.cfm#:~:text=Click%20here%20to%20submit%20a%20question>

Sincerely,

Rhonda Elmhorst-Friemoth
Superintendent
Mellen School District