



GATEWAY REGIONAL SCHOOL DISTRICT

BLANDFORD · CHESTER · HUNTINGTON · MIDDLEFIELD · MONTGOMERY · RUSSELL
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Superintendent's Corner

May 1, 2020

I can't give enough credit to the district's staff, and our students and families, that have continued to move forward with the efforts of meeting state requirements under the circumstances resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Their efforts, patience, understanding, collaboration and innovation could be exemplars for Massachusetts. While difficult, I believe that these experiences will help us as we return to school this fall under whatever circumstances are required by the state and federal governments.

I am also pleased with the overall support the district and our students have received from our member towns during this crisis. The district has offered the use of the auditorium for annual town meetings should they be allowed to move forward under the parameters of appropriate social distance. As I write this, two towns have taken advantage of this offer.

I spend a good part of my day on various conference calls with state officials, staff members, and other district superintendents. We are all in the same situation trying to determine how to best meet student needs, plan for the future, and recognize students and families for the work they've done to make the best of a difficult situation. My guess is that we are all working more hours, worrying more, and under stress from trying to plan for a future that seems uncertain.

I can guess that one of the issues we're all being faced with as town or school officials is planning ahead and setting the budget for the next fiscal year. In wide-ranging discussions with a variety of people, it is becoming evident that there is a very good chance that the district, and our member towns, may see some sort of reduction in state aid. This is almost a given based upon the anticipated revenue reductions predicted in Massachusetts that range up to almost 50% of discretionary spending (a drop in revenue estimated to be between 3 and 6 billion dollars). Coupled with the potential for not being able to hold annual town meetings before the end of June, this could lead to the implementation of a 1/12th budget for schools and a DOR authorization of expenditures on a monthly basis for towns. Perhaps we'll be lucky and things will change enough so that we're able to hold meetings and pass budgets for the fiscal year beginning on July 1.

I am thankful that the school committee has already adopted a budget and fixed town assessments for FY'21. While there was much discussion on how towns would vote on the assessment and assessment methodology (the school committee adopted the alternative assessment method), I am aware that some towns were planning to vote the higher assessment amount (between the statutory and the alternative method) so that they would not have to hold a special town meeting later in the summer for the purpose of approving their assessments. If towns were to do this, once the assessment method was determined (remember that the alternative assessment requires all six towns to vote in the affirmative) new assessment letters would be sent, if necessary. If the towns'

assessments under the approved assessment method were lower than voted, the town would then be able to use the lower number for budgeting purposes.

Other than the assessment amount differing under different assessment methods, I do not foresee asking the school committee to change the overall assessment to our towns. Thus, if the district does see a reduction in state aid, the school committee would be forced to reduce expenditures rather than raise town assessments (which is essentially what happened when we lost 20% of our state revenue in FY'03 and FY'04). Therefore, and this has been verified by the state, if towns approve their assessment amounts, even if the committee needs to change the school budget, there would not need to be any adjustment to town assessments or for another town meeting regarding the school budget. Given the teeth-gnashing of others related to having to trim budgets with increases of over 6%, the fact that the district's budget is up only 1% does provide us with some leeway should we have to exist on a 1/12th budget at last year's budgeted amount.

It is still too early to determine how much the district may lose in state and federal revenue, whether there will be additional emergency funding from the federal government, and how we'll get back to school to finalize any budgetary reductions at this point. But, we are certainly working with our staff to look at options should we have to reduce expenditures in any significant manner. We are preparing ourselves and our district in many ways to face these challenges, and we look forward to collaborating face to face again someday when the opportunity arises.